

SERMON: Words to Live By: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"
TEXT: Matthew 27:45-46

It hit me like a strong wind that pushes you back a couple steps. I was deeply moved. Really impressed. And also kind of jealous when I first saw the billboard advertising the United Methodist Church. "For all the days that end in 'why?'" Not Y, the letter, but "why?" the question. Thinking of the church as a business and feeling like we needed some good advertising to attract members, I remember the sting of it: "I wish I had thought of that." It's great advertising. Clever. Memorable. Concise.

Looking back, it surprises me what I didn't remember: Timing was also a key factor in the power of the ad. It began appearing in late 2001, shortly after the 9-11 attacks on our country. "For all the days that end in *why*."

We all know what it feels like to end a day wondering why. The people of Turkey and Syria must be crying out "why" in the

aftermath of earthquakes that destroyed entire cities and killed tens of thousands of people. The people of the Ukraine must wonder why the war rages on. The young, pregnant woman, living in a tent at the border because it's safer than going back to her home country. The young man who wants to go to college but stays home to protect his younger siblings and his mother. The elderly couple caring for the grandchild who's been kicked out of his parents' home because he's gay. The children who have lost their parents. The parents who have lost a child. The person sitting next to you might be asking "why" when they bow their head to pray.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, had been betrayed and deserted by his friends, mocked and jeered by an angry crowd, whipped and beaten, forced to carry his cross and then was nailed to it. He had been hanging there for hours. He was in

excruciating pain; he couldn't breathe; he was dying; and he felt abandoned. He, too, cried out: "My God. Why."

Years ago, a man in my church asked me, "What kind of a god does this to his son," in letting him suffer such brutality and such pain? What kind of a god abandons his son, letting him die alone on a cross? I'm not sure I had a very good answer for him at the time. But his question has stayed with me.

I don't want to get into a complicated discussion about the Trinity, but this IS God, hanging from the cross. And while Jesus the son walked the earth, it seems like he was separate from God the father. But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are inseparable. All three were present at the time of creation; all three are present in the person of Jesus; all three are suffering and dying.

Though Jesus feels forsaken, alone, and abandoned, God IS present. But sometimes, we have to rail at God, don't we? Who else is Jesus going to cry to at that moment? Who else will listen

to his anguish and his anger? Yes, I think Jesus was angry when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Many of us are so uncomfortable feeling angry with God that we will rarely admit it. But I think it's okay. I don't think it's a sin. I think we're allowed to be angry with God, because it shows that we trust God. Deep down, I think we know that we can't scare God away. God DOES NOT and WILL NOT ever forsake us, even though we feel forsaken.

If it's too hard to believe that Jesus the Christ, God in the flesh, fully divine - was also *fully human* right down to the blood, sweat, and tears of this moment - then you could choose to believe he was simply quoting scripture. Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Psalms are songs and prayers that were often used in worship. According to pastor and author Adam Hamilton, "Even though [Jesus] was questioning God... he was still praying.

Questioning God in prayer is an act of faith - even when there is confusion about what is happening." More than that, Jesus "was actually worshiping" as he questioned. And though the psalm begins with a cry of dereliction and describes in detail the suffering of the afflicted, note that it also swings back and forth from words of despair to words of hope and praise.

My god, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
From the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
And by night, but find no rest.

Yet, you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
They trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
In you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Adam Hamilton wonders, "Is it possible that Jesus chose to pray the opening words of Psalm 22 as he suffered on the cross to point not only to his pain and despair but also to his trust that God had, in fact, heard him and would deliver him?" (Adam Hamilton, "Final Words from the Cross" 2011, Abingdon Press)

So, in terms of how these words of anguish can be WORDS TO LIVE BY for us, whatever pains we suffer in life, Jesus understands. Jesus has been there through the physical and emotional, the most gut-wrenching and world shattering pain we can imagine. And it is always a comfort when we find someone else who has suffered in a similar way. When we don't have to explain how it feels. Jesus knows.

Furthermore, the fact that God is present but silent through his son's suffering provides a good example for us. Our presence speaks volumes to someone in pain, and is often more comforting than trying to give answers or advice. Often there is no answer to the question "why." Even though we cry out for an answer, no answer will be adequate.

You may have heard of the concept of "holding space" for others. Edward Brodtkin is an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. He defines holding space to be about making sure the person in your life who needs to be

listened to is heard. "Holding space for someone means that you offer them the opportunity to be seen and heard fully. It means you are intentional about setting time aside to be fully present with this person and providing them your full and undivided attention." (Vivian Manning-Schaffel, "What does it mean to hold space for someone," August 3, 2021, www.shondaland.com)

This means letting them rail at God. Letting them cry out with unanswerable questions. Letting them express their pain in whatever ways they need to. I remember a sweet story about a little boy who was sitting on the porch with his elderly neighbor who had recently been widowed. They sat there together for a long time. Finally, when the boy came home, his mother asked him what he said to the man. "Nothing," answered the boy. "I just helped him cry."

Finally, a very practical way to live by Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is to pray the psalms. There are 150 Psalms and many of them are prayers. Some are

prayers of lament and suffering, as is Psalm 22. Some are prayers of confession, asking for mercy. Some are prayers of joy and praise and thanksgiving. The most comforting thing is that even when a Psalm begins with cries of suffering and pleas for deliverance, it often ends with an expression of trust that God will deliver us.

God will never leave us or forsake us. There are about 100 verses in the Bible that include this promise. Though Jesus felt forsaken in that moment on the cross, and though he needed to express it, he believed in the promise. He knew God was present. He trusted that God would never leave him.

Through our times of intense and unbearable pain and suffering, may we also believe that God is with us and we are never alone. To the glory of God!

AMEN.