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## *The Passion Narrative: Where Our Sin Meets Christ's Faith*

**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.**  
**Palm Sunday – Year A**

*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*  
*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

This cry is an ancient one. We have heard it many times before. It is the first line of the twenty-second psalm.

We will hear it again on Good Friday, when we recite the entire psalm as part of our liturgy for the day.

This is not the only appearance that the twenty-second psalm makes in the passion narrative, though.

It seems clear that early Christian communities used the twenty-second psalm to make sense out of their experience of the death of Jesus.

And, more specifically, it seems clear that they used it to gain a deeper understanding of both Sin and faith.

Let's take Sin.

The twenty-second psalm shows us what Sin looks like.

The first step is taking the right perspective. It's not nearly as hard to recognize Sin when you are the one being unjustly persecuted. Once they turn on you, you can see the choices that they are making with newfound clarity.

Listen to the voice of the psalmist

*But I am a worm, and no man*  
*scorned by men, and despised by the people.*  
*All who see me mock me,*  
*they make mouths at me, they wag their heads,*  
*"He committed his cause to the Lord, let him deliver him,*  
*let him rescue him, for he delights in him."*

...

*They stare and gloat over me;*  
*they divide my clothes among themselves,*  
*and for my clothing they cast lots.*

It is as if the psalm were the script for the derisions shouted at Jesus by those passing by the cross, for the taunts thrown at him by the religious leaders, and for the premature disposition of his possessions by the soldiers.

They must have realized that the persecution in the psalm follows the same pattern that it does in the stories of Joseph, when his brothers sold him into slavery, and John the Baptist, when Herod Antipas yields to Salome's request.

And, the pattern will repeat itself in the stories of Paul, Peter, and James.

The pattern didn't appear for the first time in the persecution of Jesus. It is not something particular to one people. It is a universal truth about all people.

It is, in other word, our Sin as well as theirs.

It's not just the breaking of a rule or the harboring of an evil thought.

It's choosing the power of the crowd over the gift of Love.

It's choosing to believe that getting rid of this man, this woman, this group, or that people will save us.

It's choosing an identity that we think we can control over one that we know we cannot.

This is what Paul means when he says to the Corinthians,

*For our sake, he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

And, once we understand this, we get a sense of how Jewish this all is, of the debt of gratitude that we owe to Jewish culture and religion.

The twenty-second psalm makes clear that the crucifixion of Jesus reveals what it does largely because the Jews had developed a religious tradition that prepared them to see it and understand it.

And, they did.

Now, let's take faith.

The twenty-second psalm shows us that Christ is the model of faith.

The cry of the psalmist is sometimes called the "cry of dereliction."

It draws its power from the innocent suffering of the one accused. He does not understand what is happening to him. He feels forsaken by God. He has been abandoned by his friends. He fears his own death.

The psalmist says,

*I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;  
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.*

...

I can count all my bones.

It wouldn't take much for the desperation of the cry to turn into anger.

We can imagine, for example, the voice of Job taking those same words and turning them into an accusation, demanding a trial before God in which he could defend himself.

We can also imagine the cry turning, as it does in other psalms, into a demand for vengeance, a plea for God to deal harshly with the persecutors.

But, as easy as this is to imagine, this is not what the psalmist does and it's not how Jesus reacts.

The psalmist moves from a lament of suffering and abandonment into a thanksgiving for vindication and deliverance.

The psalmist says,

*To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.  
Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,  
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.*

And, so we are to understand Christ's faith. It wasn't that Christ didn't feel the suffering and the pain. It was that he leaned into it.

Jesus didn't succumb to the derision and mocking of the crowd any more than he succumbed to the temptations of the Satan in the wilderness.

Instead, like Abraham before him, he remained obedient to God.

He allowed himself to be swept up into a process that he could not control. He trusted in love even when it was not clear it would offer him any relief. It might have been here, at this very moment, when he truly understood who he was.

This is the model of faith, the faith of Christ.

It is a response of trust and obedience to God even in the face of death.

And, it is this faith of the human person Jesus that is the means by which God's saving gift of Love is made available to other humans.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says,

*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

So, what are we to make of all of this?

I am tempted to rush to Easter, to tell you a funny story to make you laugh, or a heart-warming story to make you cry.

I am tempted to confess that, now that we have seen the nature of our Sin, we won't do it again.

I am tempted to proclaim that, now that we have seen the nature of Christ's faith, we will make it our own.

But, it occurs to me that taking on the mind of Christ may require more than just being able to describe it.

Perhaps our call is to linger a little longer by the cross,

Perhaps our call is to live into this week that we call Holy,  
to bow down and wash the feet of others,  
to sit silently and watch the stripping of the altar,  
to get up and walk the stations of the cross, and  
to stand still and be present to the tragedy of Christ's death.

*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*  
*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Perhaps our call is to live into this moment and realize again for the first time that this cry is where our Sin meets Christ's faith.

Amen.