

HISTORIC SAINT JOHN'S CHURCH
Richmond, Virginia
Good Friday
April 6, 2007
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My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Have you ever been in such despair that those opening words from the Twenty-Second Psalm come to mind? Have you ever felt so low that you have felt deserted, even by God? Have you felt a terrible gulf of separation from God? I suspect that is true for all of us. If so we are in good company, for Job and Jesus, among many others have thought and spoken those very words.

But we ask, how could it be? We know that Jesus' death was an act of supreme obedience. He was doing what he came to do. He had preached the nearness of the Kingdom, called for justice for the poor and oppressed, brought disciples into his community of faith, and healed the sick. He brought wholeness and hope to life. If anyone knew God, Jesus did. But as we saw last night, when Jesus got up from the table and washed his disciples' feet, and when we hear the words from one of Isaiah's Servant Songs, just read, we realize that Jesus was a different kind of Messiah. The Messiah was to be powerful, and bring about the end of the exile and the restoration of Israel. But Jesus knew he was called to be a servant. This was dangerous business. It led to his persecution and his death.

Jesus knew what he was about. He knew the dangers. He appreciated the risks. He was obedient. Yet in the crisis, in the midst of pain, he turned to this psalm of despair. Some will suggest that Jesus was simply praying the psalm in a difficult moment. He didn't really mean he was separated from God. I believe that Jesus meant every word of it. If Jesus came among us to share completely in this human experience, then he had to know moments of despair and loss, even the loss of the presence of God.

What this means, of course, is that even in our despair we are not alone. Where and what have such moments been for you? Is it in the loss of a loved one? Maybe a person way too young. Or maybe you didn't get the job or the raise you wanted? Or you suffered a debilitating injury or illness; maybe even clinical depression? Whatever it was, was God there for you? Or was there silence? Did you cry out like Job or Jesus, or did you suffer in silence? Did someone else reach out in love to give you friendship and support? It gets all mixed up together.

On Good Friday, God was strangely silent and distant. The Cross was on a hill. Could the few who loved him and stayed with him to the end reach out to

him? Not likely. He was too far away. The table of yesterday was close and intimate. The cross of today is cold and cruel. Jesus had taken Peter, James and John to the mountain top of triumph with him. This moment embraced Jesus on the hill top of failure. That's how the world saw it. The end had come and Jesus' mission was in failure. God was far away, and failed to save Jesus from this moment; from this death on a cross. And Jesus cries out in this moment of despair.

Now the question becomes, where will we be in this moment? Will we let despair and silence overcome us? Will we be in hiding with most of the disciples, afraid that the next cross will be for us? Is the distance and fear too powerful to keep us at the cross? If we leave, we'll miss the last word of hope. Jesus closes the distance. He takes away the silence. He creates a community of love and support. He says to his mother, in reference to his disciple whom he loved, "Behold, your son!" And to the disciple, "Behold, your mother! In that instant, Jesus protects his mother and creates a new community; a new family. And so, whatever your despair, whatever the distance you feel from God, whatever the silence you hear in your heart and being, listen to these final words. Intimacy is restored. Can't you just see, the disciple who is often named as John, putting his arm around Mary's shoulder and leading her away, leading her home?

There will be times when we feel despair and the loss of God. When we do, know that Jesus felt the same, and that, therefore, we can come to him and trust him to understand and reach out to us with love, hope, compassion, and strength. The distance will disappear and Jesus will touch you with the love of God. The light from the beginning, the light that led the shepherds and the star that led the magi will still shine. There will be darkness, but the darkness will not prevail. Tonight we wait. We wait in the darkness until the new light of Easter dawns upon us.