

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"Forsaken"

Scripture: Mark 15:16-39

Rev. Steve Filyk

April 10, 2020

We have been hearing the stories
about people who have been hospitalized with COVID-19.
Stories about painful headaches,
severe fatigue, and shortness of breath.ⁱ

We have also been hearing the stories
About people who have lost loved ones to the pandemic.

Last Friday Ron Holliday, a native of London, Ontario died.
He was a beloved husband
And the dad of triplet teen girls.

The local dance community the girls were involved in
rallied to the family's support
Driving by their home to offer condolences
And gestures of love.

One participant noted
"What I just witnessed
was one of the most painful things I have ever seen.

Three beautiful young girls isolated in their home
from family and friends, comfort, hugs,
crying through masks,
standing in a window.ⁱⁱ"

Do you ever ask yourself,
“Where is God in all this suffering?”

PAUSE

Today’s Bible reading comes from Mark’s
narrative of Jesus’ passion.

Jesus is well along that road of suffering
he had talked about with his disciples.ⁱⁱⁱ

He has been betrayed by a friend.
He has been rejected by the religious leaders
And condemned by the Roman governor.

All that is left is for him to die.

But death at the hand of the Romans
Isn’t at all like modern-day executions.

Modern-day executions are intended to hasten death and minimize
suffering.

People speak of a botched execution when there is pain
Or when the condemned person lingers.

One person who has witnessed almost 300 executions
In her role as a reporter and spokesperson,
Speaks of modern-day capital punishment
“like watching someone going to sleep”.^{iv}

Now some will argue against the assertion
That modern-day capital punishment is humane.
But no-one will argue that crucifixion isn't cruel.

Just consider this: "the victim was tied or nailed to a large wooden beam
and left to hang, perhaps for several days,
until eventual death from exhaustion and asphyxiation...

Crucifixion [provided] a death that was particularly slow,
painful... gruesome, humiliating, and public..."^v

But if that wasn't enough
The soldiers charged with Jesus' crucifixion
decided to 'soften' him up first.

They dressed him up as royalty.
They struck him and mocked him.

They were cruel but they were also efficient.

They had Jesus on the cross by 9:00 am in the morning.
There he continued to be abused by those who passed by,
By the priests and teachers who stood as witnesses,
Even by the men who were hanged beside him.

At noon the sky was filled with darkness.

And at 3:00 pm Jesus speaks for the first time in Mark
Since he stood before Pilate.

Jesus cries out in a loud voice

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Deserted by his disciples,

Mocked by all around him,

Suffering the worst sort torture the Romans could find

Jesus laments that he has been forsaken, abandoned by God.

Those who pay attention to the

Cross-references in their Study Bibles will note

That these words, repeated twice by Mark

Are a direct quotation from Psalm 22,

A song of lament.

“[Jesus repeats this prayer] a clinch-fisted prayer,
that he learned as a child in Sabbath school...

in this prayer [he] speaks about the location of his Father.

Having been so intimate with the Father that he could say,

“I and the Father are one,” [and]

“If you see me, you see the Father,”

here at the end, in the darkness and dereliction,

he [is] speaking in distinction from his Father,
at some distance.

“God where are you?” is this prayer.^{vi}

So where is God in all this suffering?

- The suffering we are witnessing in the current pandemic.
- The suffering we are experiencing in our own lives.
- The suffering that we see in Jesus.

Here's the miracle.

And yes it is a paradox.

God is in the very middle of the suffering.

God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

In his humanity Jesus experienced

The worst that life could throw at him,

Even estrangement, abandonment from the Father.

But remember that while Jesus became human,
Jesus is divine,

Which means that despite this abandonment
(real or perceived)

In Jesus, God is present in this suffering.

In Jesus, God spared himself nothing,

In Jesus, God endured the worst that life could throw at him,

So that God might be present with us

in the worst we are experiencing.

PAUSE

“In 1512, the Antonite order at Isenheim,
a village about 15 miles south of Colmar in France,
commissioned two artists to make an altarpiece for their
monastic complex.

In four years, Niclaus of Hagenau (responsible for the sculpture)
and Grünewald (in charge of the painted panels),
created a complex polyptych about suffering...

[It] decorated the high altar
of the monastery hospital’s chapel
until the French Revolution. ^{vii}

I’ve heard of this altarpiece before.
The crucifixion scene is notable
For having John the Baptism
Watching at the side
Pointing with a very long finger to Christ.

It is good metaphor for preaching:
Pointing to Christ.

But if I had looked a little closer
I might have noticed that Crucified Jesus looks different than usual.
His skin is pockmarked, covered with sores.

This is not something that we read about
in Mark’s story of Jesus’ passion,
Or any of the other Gospels for that matter.

But it all makes sense when you realise that
“The monastery hospital specialized
[in the treatment of a particularly painful skin disease].

The Christ figure in the painting
is depicted as suffering from these same sores—
a sign to the patients that Christ shared in their afflictions.”^{viii}

I wonder how Grunewald would depict the same Jesus
who suffers with the COVID-19 patients,
Who suffers with those fighting mental illness,
Who suffers with those of us struggling
with whatever challenge we may be facing today...

Where is God in human suffering?
He is in the very middle of it.

PAUSE

But if you are looking for something more
Than solidarity in your suffering
Consider this:

The psalm Jesus quotes from the cross,
that begins by lamenting God’s absence,
ends proclaiming God’s salvation.

“You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him...

For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.”^{ix}

This we will hear about on Easter Sunday.

Amen.

ⁱ See “Think You've Got COVID-19? Here's What Doctors Say About When To Seek Help” April 2, 2020 www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/02/825491635/think-youve-got-covid-19-here-s-what-doctors-say-about-when-to-see-help

ⁱⁱ Jordyn Read “Community mourns father of triplets who lost battle to coronavirus” April 5, 2020 london.ctvnews.ca/community-mourns-father-of-triplets-who-lost-battle-to-coronavirus-1.4883547

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mark 8:31

^{iv} “The woman who watched 300 executions in Texas” May 7, 2018 www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43995866

^v “Crucifixion” *Wikipedia*

^{vi} . William Willimon *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross*

^{vii} Magda Michalska “A Complex Polyptych About Pain and Passion” January 22, 2019 www.dailyartmagazine.com/polyptych-about-pain-and-passion/

^{viii} Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons *Crucifixion*, by Matthias Grünewald December 27, 2016 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/crucifixion-matthias-gr%C3%BCnewald>

^{ix} Psalm 22:23,24 NIV