

Alone in the Dark

Fourth in a Series of Seven, "Words From the Cross"

March 18, 2020

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Matthew 27 It was about twelve at noon, when darkness came over the whole country, because the sun had stopped shining, and the darkness lasted until three in the afternoon. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon Jesus called out aloud, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani?" which means, "My God, My God! Why did You forsake Me? When some of the men who were standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, He is calling Elijah."

Dear Friends in Christ,

The fourth word is in the middle of the seven words which Jesus spoke on the cross, and it takes us to the heart of his suffering. It shows us in what He suffered how angry God is over our sins and how deeply He has loved us.

Tonight, I invite you to come one more time to the foot of the cross with all of your weariness, your anxiety, and your and every bit of uncertainty. Come with your failures, your faults, and every bit of your frailty. Come with your questions, your opinions, and your passions. Specifically, tonight, come with every bit of darkness which is haunting you or holding you back and making you feel alone.

It's Friday afternoon, and it's dark everywhere. At Jesus' birth, the night on Bethlehem's field turned bright as day, but at his day turned dark as night. This darkness, from 12 to 3 in the afternoon, was not an eclipse. In an eclipse the sun is up there, the earth is down here, and the moon comes between the two. Then the side of the moon that faces the earth is dark.

When Jesus died, there was a full moon, it was in the days of the Passover. The sun which is 93 million miles away and one and a third million times as large as the earth stopped shining. It was as though God wrapped a blanket of darkness around the earth as he did in the Egyptian plague. No doubt frightened folks all over the world stopped eating, travelers stopped traveling, without exception, routines were interrupted. Heaven and earth was terrified at what was being done to the very Son of God.

Jesus was alone in the dark. In Gethsemane, Jesus had called on the angels to be with him. He wanted the company of his disciples, but they kept falling asleep. Judas sold him out, Peter followed at a distance, all the others ran away. Jesus was alone with the soldiers when they tied his hands, alone before Annas, alone before Caiphas, alone before Herod, and alone before Pilate. His own people cried out for his crucifixion, his religious leaders wanted him dead, but the worst slap in the face of all was that His Father abandoned him in anger towards the sins of every generation.

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There's only one thing that can separate anyone from God, and that is sin. As often as we sin, we turn our backs to God, we cut ourselves off from His love, we wander away from his grace, we stumble into the grip of the forces of darkness, we become like sheep without a shepherd leaving the green pastures and sauntering into patches of thistles and worse.

By nature, of course, Jesus is not a sinner whose sin separates Him from God. He is the holy, the innocent, the spotless, the pure and the righteous one The Bible says that he was tempted in every way that we are and yet without sin. And yet God forsook Him like a criminal sinking into hell. Most of the time in his days of arrest and trial, he was that lamb who opened not His mouth. But in the darkness, He cried out “why?” In that cry there is misery, and there is mystery. This suffering puzzles Jesus. Into his human mind, there has come such a darkness that for a moment He can't see clearly the purpose of it all.

As you spend time at the foot of the cross, tonight I invite you to reflect on those times in your life when you could not see clearly the purposes of God. Perhaps it was a time when your marriage or the marriage of a loved one was fading towards failure. Perhaps it was when a young person in your life died without warning, perhaps it was when a friend took his own life or a parent suffered from cancer or a grandparent declined rapidly into dementia. In these days of coronavirus, no doubt all of us are wondering about the purposes of God. It seems like we are living in a long and lonely tunnel full of people in faraway places struggling to breathe on ventilators, national shutdowns, statewide orders, economic ruin, and worse. Where is the light at the end of the tunnel?

A better question, of course, is who is the light at the end of the tunnel, and the clear answer of Scripture, of course, is Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Although it doesn't feel like it these days, He is sitting at the right hand of His father, he is ruling all of heaven and earth for the benefit of his church. He is the light of the world, in Him there is no darkness.

The Good news is as good as it has ever been in these days. Even when and especially when we feel alone in the dark, we are not. Christ would hold us close and invite us to live by faith instead of by sight. To believe that Jesus heals all of our diseases either here on earth or in heaven one day soon. To live by faith is to hold onto the promises of God instead of blowing in the wind with every news headline that catches our attention. To live by faith. To live by faith is to know that because He was forsaken, we are not. Because he was punished, we are declared innocent. Because he was crucified until he was dead and buried, we may look each other in the eyes and say it out loud, even though I walk through the valley of

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the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks do get afraid of the dark, but as often as they remember what they have learned from their mother's knees, they are still and they know that God is God. They are regularly tempted to shake their puny little fists at Almighty God wondering why he allows such chaos, but as often as they meet up with one or two other Christians, they know that Jesus Christ is in the midst of them, and they calm down. Tonight, as they hear a Son crying out to His Father, they remember that they are the dear children who may approach their dear father in heaven any time they want to. And so, they lay their heads down on their pillows with the peace that only Christ can give, they trust that God neither slumbers nor does He sleep. And the next day they wake up, not so much hunkering down in fear, but rather hunkering down as the beloved people of God wondering what it means in these days to love their neighbors as much as they love themselves.