

A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: FORSAKEN

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Mark 15:16-39

Although today is Palm Sunday, I would like to talk about the crucifixion—the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The most important thing that I want to impress upon you about the crucifixion is that it was not a random event. It was not spontaneous. It was not ad hoc or impromptu. It was not spur-of-the-moment. It was planned. The crucifixion was not a twist of fate, it was a deliberate act of God's love.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, our Savior, did not take place because Jesus turned over the tables in the temple.

The crucifixion did not take place because the Jewish authorities were jealous of his popularity among the people and feared for their power.

The crucifixion did not take place because the Romans wanted to eliminate a potential insurrectionist, especially one who called himself *King of the Jews*.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ took place as part of God's gracious plan for the salvation of humankind, a plan initiated thousands of years earlier, a plan that began when God called two people, Abram and Sarai, to come and follow, and they agreed.¹ We know Abram and Sarai as Abraham and Sarah, and God called them to leave the land of their ancestors and go to a place that God would show them. And they did. God promised that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and that their names alone would be a blessing to all people.

But God made more than just a promise. God also made a covenant with Abram and Sarai—a covenant that God would be their God and watch over them if they would be God's people.

A covenant is like a contract, except a contract takes place between equal parties. Whereas, in ancient days, a covenant was an agreement between unequal parties where one has more powerful than the other.

We find covenants between kings and their subjects; we have a covenants between God and God's people. Kings and gods can do whatever they want; the laws

¹ *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* Genesis 12:1-3

don't pertain to them; they don't need contracts or agreements. But in this case, God chose and ordained a covenant with God's people.

To establish this covenant, Abraham invoked the covenant ritual. He took three large animals and he sliced each of them in two equal parts. And he laid those parts side by side so that there was a path between the halves of each animal.

Then, according to the ritual, the lesser party—in this case Abraham—would walk through the halves of the dead animals to acknowledge that if they were to break the covenant, that their lives would be forfeit. However, after cutting the animals in half, Abraham falls asleep. We read: *As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.* In this deep and terrifying darkness, God appears to Abraham and God restates the terms of the covenant vowing to watch over Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

And then something astounding happens. God himself, in the form of fire and smoke, passes through the halves of the severed animals. In other words, God takes Abraham's place and covenants God's life because God knew that we, as people, could never fully honor the covenant. We would sin. We would turn away from God. We would forsake God and nullify the covenant. But our lives are not worth enough to pay the price of the covenant. It would be as if I were to rob Fort Knox of all its gold and then spend it, and then I'm caught and forced to pay restitution. I wouldn't have enough in my bank account to pay off the price of what I had done. In the same way, our lives cannot cover the cost of our sins against God. Our lives cannot balance out the covenant. Only the life of God can do that. God puts God's life on the line in this covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

For the rest of history, our scripture contains story after story of people falling away from God, of turning from God, of forsaking God. But God always calls us back.

God sent prophets to teach us the way back to God, until finally God declares, "I must do this myself." God came to us as one of us, in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth, of Galilee in Judea. Jesus came to show us how to live as the people of God, to save us, and to give his life for us as payment for our sins.

Jesus lived in perfect relationship with God—something we should aspire to do. Throughout his lifetime, Jesus was in continuous contact with God through prayer. Think of all the times we read that Jesus retreated to a quiet place in order to pray. He went to be with God.

Following the Passover meal, Jesus led his disciples out to Gethsemane. There, he prayed for hours. He spoke with God, he conversed with God, he argued with God, he listened to God. And in that prayer, knowing what was going to happen to

him, he asked if it were possible that God *remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.*

Jesus had already informed the disciples that he would suffer and die, but then he would come back to them alive. But the greatest suffering he would endure was not the pain of the crucifixion. Yes, that would be agonizing, but the true suffering is that he would be separated from God. Jesus would die and spend time in Hell. Hell, by definition, is that place where God is not. In Hell, Jesus would be utterly and absolutely alone, cut off from God as never before. That is the cup he would like to be removed—the unimaginable darkness of separation from God. That is the suffering he wants to avoid. But it is God's plan, the plan to pay the price for the sins of the world, for us.

If the first lesson of this sermon is that God has a plan for our salvation, then the second lesson is about obedience. Jesus was fully obedient to God's plan, despite the pain and isolation that it would inflict upon him.

On Sunday of Holy Week, Jesus and his disciples joined the throngs of people parading into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They wave palm branches as Jesus rides a donkey. They shout, *Hosanna, Hosanna.* But those crowds, as we know, will turn against him by the end of the week.

On Monday, Jesus enters the temple and disrupts the business of the money changers declaring that they had turned God's house into a *den of robbers.*

On Thursday, he celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples, a meal we call the Last Supper. And then, following the meal, he leads the disciples out of the city to Gethsemane, where he prays. Here, the disciples are unable to stay awake as he requests. They sleep. They let him down. Judas arrives with a small mob and arrests Jesus and takes him back to the Sanhedrin, where he is tried and accused of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah.

He is, of course, the Messiah, but the Jewish leaders are unable to recognize this. They call for his execution. Since they are unable to carry out this sentence, they take him to the Romans, where Pilate questions him over the charge that he is *King of the Jews.* The crowd roars a demand that Pilate pardon Barabbas instead of Jesus. Barabbas had led a murderous insurrection. He is the savior the people desire.

And then in our reading today, Pilate hands Jesus over to the soldiers who are to escort him out of the city to a place called Golgotha where he is to be crucified. But before taking him there, the soldiers have a bit of fun, mocking Jesus, beating him, draping an old, dirty purple cloth on him and twisting some thorns into a crown for his head. And then they salute him shouting, *Hail, King of the Jews!* as

they hit him and spit on him and kneel before him in a parody of paying homage to a king.

The soldiers marched him out of the city toward Golgotha. But Jesus too weakened to bear the burden of the horizontal beam of the cross, so they conscripted a man named Simon to carry this execution apparatus.

At Golgotha, someone offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh. This would have acted as a sedative and a painkiller, but Jesus refused it. He remained wholly obedient to God's plan.

And Jesus was crucified, a horrific ordeal. Above him was a placard that identifying his crime as *King of the Jews*. As he hung on the cross, passersby belittled him, challenging him to save himself. If he was so powerful, if he was the Messiah, then certainly he could remove himself from the cross. What kind of "Messiah" would die like this?

The chief priests and scribes said the same thing: *He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.*

Even those being crucified around him taunted him.

On each side of him, were two men also being crucified. They are identified as being rebels, possibly part of the insurrection led by Barabbas. But it does remind us of that time when the disciples, James and John, were arguing among themselves over who would sit at Jesus' side in glory. Jesus told them that they didn't know what they were asking. We see it here; the cost of discipleship is to walk the path of Christ.

Then, after six hours, in a heart-wrenching cry, Jesus implores, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* These are the opening words of Psalm 22, and it means, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* To be forsaken means to be abandoned, to be deserted.

Jesus knows the answer as to why he being abandoned. It is God's plan, a plan that originated with a covenant thousands of years earlier.

And then, with a loud cry, Jesus dies.

And what we realize is that in this last day of Jesus' life, although innocent, he is totally and completely abandoned. He's forsaken not just by God, but by all people. His disciples are nowhere to be seen; the crowds deride him; the authorities mock him; the soldiers beat him. There is no one who is there with him or for him. And in death, he is disconnected from God.

The crucifixion is the low point of this week of holy terror. And I could leave it right there with the death of Christ.

But we need to remember that we are on a journey not just to Easter but beyond. Christ returns and those that abandoned him are offered a second chance and a new covenant. It takes them a little while to get traction, but they do and they create what we call the church, an ongoing movement of the followers of Jesus—the one who was obedient, the one who sacrificed everything for others.

As we go from this place today, let us not get lost in the darkness that covered the land, let us rejoice in the light that is our Christ. Let us understand that Jesus, the one who knew no sin, chose to be separated from the one he called *Abba, Father* so that we might be reunited to God.

As followers of Christ, let us always be mindful of those in this world who have been forsaken, those who feel crushed by the darkness, those that Jesus identified: the poor, the hungry, the widows and orphans, those who are fighting disease, the mentally ill, the neglected, those who are in prison, the immigrant and the alien.

May we make it our mandate to reach out to these children of God in the name of the one who died for us, the one who understands more than any person the pain of being forsaken. Let us reach out to them and assure them that they are not alone, that God is always with them. Let us do this out of compassion, out of mercy, out of love, and out of obedience itself—obedience to God's plan.