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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Lent II – Midweek
March 3/4, 2010
Text: Matthew 27:45–46 The Faithful Word¹

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The biblical text for tonight's sermon is from Matthew 27: 45–46, "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Thus ends the reading of God's Word.

The third word of the cross is an entirely different word. It's a word directed to the Father, a cry of abandonment in the God-forsakenness of our sin. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Those are the opening words from Psalm 22 spoken by Jesus in Aramaic, His native tongue.

Onlookers would have recognized the opening verses of Psalm 22, the anguished cry of King David in his time of trial. "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?" (v. 1). If they had the psalm committed to memory, and many did, they would have remembered David's vividly prophetic portrayal of a crucifixion long before crucifixions were even invented. "For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (vv. 16–18). Jesus is not only quoting this psalm, He's living it, dying it.

With His cry of dereliction, Jesus underscores the prophetic nature of His death. This is no accident, no simple miscarriage of justice, no sad quirk of history. His death in the darkness between noon and three is written large into every page of the Old Testament. It's the thread that connects the writings of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms into a unified whole. David's sufferings are a picture, a type or foreshadowing of Jesus on the cross. The sentences are no coincidences; they are the plan of God from all eternity that the world should find its redemption in the death of the Son of David, the Son of God.

This is an easily misunderstood cry. Those who heard Jesus misheard Him and thought He was calling out for the prophet Elijah to save Him. They offer Jesus a drink of sour wine and wait to see if Elijah comes.

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But Jesus has no need for Elijah's services. He has come to fulfill Elijah and all of the prophets. His cry is not a call for help, but a cry out of the depths of our fallen humanity, out of our own death and despair. This is your abandonment, your darkness, your sin, your death that Jesus is experiencing in His own flesh.

He became the Sinner, condemned under God's wrath, cursed on the tree. He is the adulterer, the thief, the murderer, the idolater. He is you. He willingly, knowingly, freely offers Himself on the altar of God's justice, taking on Adam's sin and rebellion and yours and making it His own. "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Sin is alienating. It drives a wedge between God and us and between each of us. Because of sin, Adam and Eve were driven from the garden and barred from the tree of life. Because of sin, we are driven into the isolation of self, the solitary confinement of our own selves curved in upon ourselves. Sin would shut us from God and from one another, leaving us permanently warped inward in a prison locked from the inside. In our time of darkness and despair, we cry out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" but the truth of the matter is we have forsaken God. We have turned from Him. We like sheep have gone astray, the prophet declares, each in his or her own way. We have turned from God; God has not turned from us.

Jesus, as the perfect Substitute, takes our place. He puts Himself where we are. He places Himself into our killing fields, our concentration camps, our abortion clinics, our prisons and gulags. He enters into all the God-forsaken places where we cry out in despair, "Where are You, God? Why have You forsaken us?" Jesus asks the "why" question on behalf of all of us. Why does God permit this to happen? Why do the innocent suffer? Why does a just God permit suffering and a merciful God not prevent it?

There is paradox in this cry. Jesus prays to a Father who appears to have abandoned Him in His time of need. He cries out into the darkness from His cross, and His cries trail off into the silence. And still, like David who prayed these words before Him, He prays. Here is the paradox and mystery of faith. Faith prays to the God who is silent, who appears to have withdrawn, who appears not to be there. Faith calls out "my God" and will not let God off the hook. This is faith that clings to the promise of God. Like the centurion who said to Jesus, "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8), faith trusts that the word of Jesus is sufficient.

This is the faith of Jesus that is at the heart of our faith. He trusts for us. He prays for us. He cries out for us. He suffers for us. He dies for us. He embraces us so that we will never be forsaken in our time of need; we will never be alone in the hour of our death; we will not be abandoned in the Day of Judgment. Jesus is there, joined to us and we to Him in baptismal faith. He is with us, always, promising never to leave or forsake us.

Remember this faithful word when God seems to have forsaken you. Remember this cry of the Son of God calling out to heaven in your place, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”, and know that God has vindicated Jesus in His death by the power of the resurrection, and He vindicates you in Jesus. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). You are reconciled to God in Christ. You are justified in Jesus. You are safe in Jesus. And you are never forsaken. Let us pray:

For Your suffering in the darkness, for Your cry of abandonment, for Your becoming our sin so that we in You might become the righteousness of God, for Your taking upon Yourself our alienation, our division, our estrangement, our death, we give You thanks, most holy Jesus. Amen.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.