

SERMON TITLE: The Seven Last Words of Christ: #4—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 15:25-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 19, 2017, at First UMC and Veterans Nursing Home

INTRODUCTION

During this season of Lent, we've been contemplating The Seven Last Words of Christ. Those sayings from the cross convey a lot of meaning—not only for Jesus and his original disciples, but also for us today. We began with, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Then we heard Jesus promise, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Next, we heard Jesus say, "Here is your son . . . Here is your mother." This morning, we've arrived at statement number four, which is probably the most disturbing thing that Jesus said. While the other statements are comforting, or at least refer to the natural ending of death, this fourth last word of Jesus makes us very uncomfortable. And, yet, I believe—if we allow ourselves to feel the agony of Jesus—his cry of complaint might also have the power to give us hope.

1—FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE

First we go into that feeling of discomfort. Like a rollercoaster ride, we head downhill fast. To help us get there, I'm going to relate some stories from this week's news.

On Monday evening, I was watching *The News Hour* on PBS when they presented a story about South Sudan. The announcer warned that the images would be graphic and some viewers might be disturbed. They then proceeded to show pictures of children too weak to walk or even to brush the flies from their eyes. The hopeless affect of those children and their mothers communicated the extreme famine occurring in that country. You may recall that South Sudan is a very new republic. At its formation in 2011, there was great rejoicing. The idea was that, if the southern part of Sudan would separate from the northern part, then conflict could cease, and peace could come. But, only two years later, civil war broke out in the new country. Since 2013, an estimated 300,000 people have died in the

conflict. The violent battles have disrupted agricultural production, and thousands are already suffering horrific malnutrition. By July, the number of starving people is expected to reach five million.

If you were one of those South Sudanese mothers, holding a dying child in your arms, might you cry out with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“Filipino United Methodists condemn killings” was the headline of a United Methodist News Service article I read on Thursday. The article reported that “more than 7,000 people have died since Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte launched his ‘war’ on the drug trade in July.” United Methodists are part of an alliance that’s documenting cases of killings and human rights violations. “The churches, the public, the human community would not ignore that the poor people are killed, the legally defenseless are killed, [the] economically defenseless are killed, [and] social outcasts are killed,” said a United Methodist deaconess. “We document cases so that the killings must be stopped.” In the slaughter of 7,000 people, “not only did [the authorities] fail to eradicate the drug menace,” said a member of the alliance, “but they created another layer of suffering, terror, erosion of trust, and outright proliferation of another crime, especially in poor communities.”¹

If you were the father or child of one of those 7,000 executed Filipinos, might you cry out with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Yesterday, in the yard of Warren Temple United Methodist Church in LaGrange, Georgia, a marker was dedicated to memorialize Austin Callaway, who, in 1940, was unjustly jailed, snatched out of the jail by a hooded mob, shot multiple times, and left in a ditch to die. The marker will also memorialize three other African Americans who were lynched in that town. “The marker paints an unflinching picture of the brutal legacy of racial violence across Georgia and the South from 1877 to 1950. It describes how thousands were lynched across the region and how the victims were often subjected to burning and mutilation, sometimes in front of crowds of thousands of spectators.”²

Can you imagine if you were one of those being strung up and tortured—or the wife or child of one of those men? Might you cry out with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Or, if you can't imagine the feelings of the South Sudanese, the Filipinos, or the African Americans of our own pre-Civil rights era, maybe you can recall some feelings you yourself have had at some time when the burden of pain, suffering, and worry seemed unjustly heavy; when death came too early to someone you loved; or when something very unfair severely diminished the quality of your own life. If you've had an experience like that, maybe you can relate, at least a little bit, to Jesus on the cross. I know; these emotions seem risky. But we're in a safe place here at church. So I encourage you to allow yourself to connect with those feelings. Have you ever, or might you ever, cry out with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

2—FINDING THE POWER OF HOPE

Now that we've gone to the bottom of the roller coaster, let's see if we can go back up. After feeling uncomfortable, how do we go about finding the power of hope?

Hope comes to us in this statement of Jesus in a couple ways. First of all, it's honest. Jesus said what he was feeling, and we can too. Whenever we're honest with God and ourselves, that's a great beginning. It's like the first level in a 12-step program. You begin by admitting you have a problem that's messing up your life. Only after we get that big confession off our chests are we able to connect with God in a powerfully healing way. When life has dealt us a terrible blow, there's no reason to pretend that everything's fine. There's no reason to sugarcoat a horrible situation.

And these dying words of Jesus assure us that it really is OK to be this honest with God. In fact, Jesus got his permission from scripture. His words from the cross are actually a quotation from Psalm 22. That Jewish hymn begins with this exact complaint: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It then continues, “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” The song lyrics note that the Jewish ancestors had trusted God, and God had delivered them. Yet, the writer and

singers of this psalm complained of God's seeming absence in their own time of need. They cried out about their great suffering that included feeling like "a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people." Troubles are enumerated in verse after verse, so much so that the gospel writers used this old Jewish blues song to describe the experience of Jesus on the cross.

As long as we're trying to hide the truth, it's hard to get the help we need. But if we say it like we feel it and pour out our hearts in honesty to God, then we can begin finding the power of hope.

Of course, hope isn't found just by being brutally honest about how wretched we feel. There's a second component here, and that is believing that God really is present and listening. When we say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we're actually proclaiming our faith that God is present enough to hear our complaint. Why else would we say it? And it's not just an impersonal God we're addressing, but "*my* God" who knows us intimately and cares for us. In the emotional moment of crisis and suffering, it may be hard to comprehend all this in our logical brains, but after we unload our frustrations, we're able to regain our sense that God really has been with us, all along, listening to the cries of our hearts.

While Jesus was dying on the cross, he didn't have time or energy to explain all this. But Psalm 22 helps us understand. Being a Jew who worshiped God regularly, Jesus would have known more than just the first verse of this Psalm. Having sung this song since he was a little boy, Jesus would have known that about half way through, the prayer changes from complaint to requests for deliverance and salvation. And then, the Psalm writer claims God's rescue and begins to proclaim it to the congregation in praise. "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." The Psalm then instructs all the children of Israel to praise and glorify God because God "did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted." Instead, "the poor shall eat and be satisfied," and "all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord." The final verses of the song

acknowledge that we mortal human beings do all eventually “sleep in the earth” and “go down to the dust.” But the dominion and praise of God will continue beyond us to future generations.

When Jesus began this song of complaint, he knew the ending of praise. When he was hanging alone on the cross, he remembered the faith of the congregation. When he felt himself going down to the dust, he knew that there was still hope for the future. Despite the very real agony of his torturous death that caused him to cry out as one forsaken, Jesus knew that God was greater than his pain, and that God would endure longer than Jesus’ life on this earth. It’s true that God may sometimes seem distant and slow to answer our prayers. But God does hear us, and God will prevail. This is the power of our hope and the hope of all who are yet to come.

CONCLUSION

I’m looking forward to seeing the movie *The Shack*. If you’ve already seen it or read the book, you know that it tells the difficult story of a father who lost his young daughter and has been grieving terribly for her. Mack just can’t come to grips with how God could let such a tragedy steal away her innocent life. But then God reaches out to Mack and helps him heal. As I said in the announcements, some of us will be going to see the movie on Tuesday, March 28. We’ll have a discussion about it afterward to help process our emotions of tragedy and our questions about God. Maybe that’s something you would like to do too. It helps to talk about uncomfortable feelings in a safe context of faith, where we can also find the power of hope. That, I think, is the example Jesus gave us in his statement, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

¹ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/filipino-united-methodists>

² <http://www.myajc.com/news/family-reveals-year-old-secret-georgia>