

Minimum Protection, Maximum Support
Matthew 27:39-46
Lenten Vespers
March 10, 2021

Introduction to Vespers – March 10, 2021

Here we are again... gathered as one body yet not in one place, separated by physical distance, but still woven together in the power of the Spirit—the church, the body of Christ, doing what we can for the healing of the world. I just want to say that am thankful for you—to just know you are out there—and I hope that during this time of worship you might pause from time to time to realize that people are joining in this time of worship from coast to coast, even from different places around the world. So even if you are sitting in front of your computer or iPad by yourself, you are not alone. You are joined by friends and strangers alike, (as Heather said last week, we are FAMILY) all of us searching for God’s presence in our days, all of us trying to make some meaning out of our current experience, all of us waiting for the season of recovery and healing to begin.

Opening Words (same each week)

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a humble spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.
Teach us to do your will,
for you are our God.
God shows such love for us
in that while we still were sinners
Christ died for us.
You, O Lord, are full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger, and rich in kindness.

The Fourth Word
My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

I invite you to listen for God’s word found in Matthew 27:39–46.

39Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” 44The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. 45From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Message

Jesus asked a lot of questions during his relatively brief ministry on earth – 307 to be precise. Yet, THIS question... his LAST question in his earthly life, was different from all the others. It wasn't meant to teach us anything... it was not rhetorical... it wasn't even offered for the benefit of those who are listening in. Rather, as Martin Copenhaver has written, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" is an expression of isolation. It is raw and threatening, like an open wound. And, like Jesus hanging on the cross, it hangs in the air unanswered.¹

It was not simply a question either, it was the beginning of a prayer... the beginning of a psalm: Psalm 22... a psalm that Jesus would have known by heart. Perhaps his mother Mary or his relative Elizabeth taught Jesus to pray it. Or maybe a rabbi in his hometown taught it to Jesus when he was a young man. Regardless, the words of Psalm 22 had apparently lodged deeply inside him, so deeply that it formed the language he used as he took his final few breaths.

And finally, this question is different because it is not directed to us, but only to God—asking God why, at the end of his long battle, WHY the One he had always called Father... The One to whom he had committed himself without reservation, WHY he had not stopped his suffering... had not prevented his pain... had not taken the cup away from him as he had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus asks.

So, what are we to make of it? What are we to make of the fact that the first scripture that came to Jesus' mind... the prayer that best expressed how he felt at the end, was a cry of lament? Ironically, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor takes some comfort from that truth. In her book of sermons entitled *God in Pain*, she puts it this way: Christ speaks, not from some safe place outside of human suffering but from the very heart of it. He is the trampled one, the crushed and soiled one whose loyalty to humankind leads him to endure all that we endure—right up to and including the silence of God. When Jesus howls his last question from the cross, it is God who howls—protesting the pain, opposing it all with his last breath. Only this is no defeat. This is, contrary to all appearances, a triumph over suffering. By refusing to avoid it or to lie about it in any way, the crucified one opens a way through it.² It is what the late William Sloane Coffin always said: We see in Jesus that God gives us minimum protection, but maximum support. Minimum protection, but maximum support.

That maximum support is what you need to be assured of as you sit with Jesus' last question before he dies... for surely some of you have traveled through seasons when praise felt like a distant memory and lament was all you could manage... seasons when, in your own dark nights of the soul, God's presence felt so hidden that you wondered if any of it was real... if any of it could be trusted?

¹ Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question*, p. 109.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, p. 114

Well, I would submit to you that this is part of what makes Jesus' very last question so powerful. Because in this last question... formed by a prayer of his faith... WE come to understand that EVEN Jesus felt this way... even Jesus felt alone and abandoned... and showed us that there is no place we can go where he hasn't already been... that nothing is outside of his reach. Minimum protection, but maximum support.

One last thing that many of you Bible students know – this psalm that Jesus prays, Psalm 22, while it is indeed a prayer of lament, does not get stuck in lament forever. Indeed, after the psalmist cries out in despair and abandonment, he then moves into faith and praise. We don't know how or why or what happened – the text doesn't tell us. We just see that the move happens. And perhaps it is that move from lament and God-forsakenness to praise and gratitude that reveals to us that, in some way, God DID HEAR... GOD DID RESPOND... GOD DID INTERVIENE. God did indeed lift the psalmist up out of the pit, providing a way out of no way... bringing hope and healing and a new future for the one who for the longest time could not imagine it on his own. And you have to wonder whether that shift from honest lament to honest praise might also be a reason why this particular prayer was what Jesus chose to speak with his last breath. After all, he knew the whole psalm. He had undoubtedly prayed the entire prayer. Jesus knew how God, in God's time, did ultimately respond to the psalmist's suffering and struggle... and would not abandon him either. Therefore, might it be that Jesus, by using this question from Psalm 22, can reach forward through centuries and remind all who would have heard him cry that there would be more to the story... more to HIS story... more to OUR story too? Because here's the thing about Jesus that day – God was not done yet. And here's the thing about us THIS day – God still isn't. Amen.