

Luke 23:32-49

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’ ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ ⁴²Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ⁴³He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Many Easter Sundays in my childhood we would have Easter dinner with my Grandparents who lived in a small town about ninety miles from us. This meant we would leave right from church, or if we were lucky, right after Sunday School, and we would make the drive along Highway 74 through Nebraska farm country to Shickley, Nebraska. And at that time of year, during the Easter season, we were always guaranteed to see a few fields with three crosses in them – usually white, and usually up close to the highway. It was a lot of work for some farmer – especially during the busy time of Spring as they were preparing the ground and planting – to put up three crosses in their field. I wonder why they did not stop with one cross, which would have gotten the same basic message across with one-third the work; it would have sparked a reminder of same story for those of us traveling that Nebraska highway whether it was one or three crosses.

Though, in more recent years, when I see three crosses together I wonder if perhaps one cross and three crosses are different messages.

The wreckage of the cross is so hard to understand that the Bible gives us four reports on it – not one gospel but four, in which the same story is told from four different perspectives. They all agree on some things: 1) Jesus died on a cross at a place called Golgotha. 2) There was a sign above his head that spelled out the charge against him: King of the Jews. 3) People were so sure he was not coming down that they divided up his clothes on the spot. 4) He was offered some sour wine before he died. 5) He died, before sundown on the day before the Sabbath. 6)

And they all agree that two other people died the same day in the same way, Jesus was not crucified alone.¹

And while all four gospels agree that there were two other victims of State sanctioned murder, *Luke* is the only one who tells of the conversation between Jesus and the other two men who died alongside him.

It started after they had been hanging there for a while. Jesus was getting much attention from the crowd, perhaps because some had known him or followed him, and now wanted to distance themselves, or it could have been the sign above his head was more spectacular than the others, “This is the King of the Jews.” According to *Matthew* and *Mark*, they were robbers, but *Luke* does not even say that much. Just “criminals” *Luke* calls them, so they may have been thieves, tax evaders, runaway slaves, or revolutionaries. Whatever they did, one of them did not think it was as bad as what Jesus had done and decided to join with the jeering of the crowd.² “Aren’t you the Messiah...If you are so great, why don’t you get us out of here?” It is interesting how we so often look for someone else to justify ourselves or avoid taking responsibility – someone who has made worse decisions, has a more severe character flaw, or is in a worse situation.

His mocking of Jesus is loud enough that the other criminal over on the other side of Jesus is able to hear him and snapped back, “Do you not fear God?” he said, defending the man dying next to him. “We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”

¹ From Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, *The Voice of Love*.

² From Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “Man in the Middle.”

Luke does not name them, but according to the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus (which did not make the Bible), their names were Dismas and Gestas – Dismas being the criminal who defended Jesus, and Gestas being the one who would have spit on him if he could have gotten himself turned in the right position.³

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” are the words offered by Dismas, as he comes to the tragic end of his own life. He still seems to have hope left in something beyond himself, and he wants to be remembered – as his life comes to a close, he wants to be remembered. He is granted much more.

For some of us, the Passion story – the Good Friday events – almost hold more meaning than Easter does. It is not that we have nothing against lilies, trumpets, hymns of praise, or kids in new pastel clothes. It is just that Good Friday, as awful as it is, often feels more recognizable. We know about suffering. We know about death. For those who know our way around pain and death, there is a bit of comfort, I think, in the fact that God knows it too. Easter can be hard to believe. Good Friday is not hard to believe.⁴ We live in a land that lives at the foot of the cross – the state putting people to death, that is not hard to believe – killing people who brought nothing but love and light to the world, this we can sadly comprehend much easier than resurrection & an empty tomb.

³ The names of the criminals also comes from “Man in the Middle.”

⁴ Idea comes from Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “The Silence of God.”

In the midst of this terrible scene of execution, in Jesus we see faithfulness, love and courage – words that are not spoken out of anger or revenge, but works of forgiveness and comfort.

Though, Jesus' courage is not the courage of a conquering savior. It is, instead, the courage of a beaten and bewildered man who goes on believing in God although God seems nowhere to be found.

We certainly have seen and heard plenty about Christ's physical suffering – Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ' seemed to be completely about the torture and physical suffering Jesus endured. That film was incredibly hard to watch, even for those like me who are part of a generation is largely desensitized to on screen violence. As deforming and excruciating as it can be, I am not sure that the physical pain was the worst part of the cross. There is the betrayal of intimate friends: those who slept when he needed them most, the one who sold him to his enemies, those who abandoned him, and the one who denied even knowing him. These are not nails in the hands. These are nails in the heart.⁵

And still, these may not even be the worst.

There is the silence of God. This, I think, is the most painful part of it all, the utter silence of God. The God who does not act. The God who seems to be nowhere to be found. The God who – by a single word – could have made all the pain and betrayal bearable, but who did not speak, at least not that Jesus could hear. The only voice at the end was his own, uttering his final words, from the thirty-first Psalm, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Twice before Jesus' work and actions had been affirmed by a voice from heaven. First, at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And again at the

⁵ The idea of this movement of 'what is the most painful part of the cross' comes from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "The Silence of God."

mysterious Transfiguration on God's holy mountains, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And so why could this not happen a third time, on that last day. What a difference that might have made. But, it seems that it did not come, and Jesus died in silence.

That is what every believer must reckon with, at some point in our life of faith, God's seeming silence. That silence that follows our own pleas to God to do something – to protect us, rescue us, send us a sign, give us a way out of this path that is leading us to the cross. Often, it feels, we too must suffer the silence with the crucified Christ – unsure what this silence says about us; unsure what it says about God.

And yet, as I consider the silence of God in that moment, I can't help but remember what some Nebraska farmers were telling everyone who drove Highway 74 in the spring time, that Jesus did not die alone. In a sermon he preached to those imprisoned in Basel, Switzerland, the famous theologian Karl Barth said, "The two criminals together with Jesus formed the first Christian community." One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses makes a church.⁶

So, perhaps God was not silent that afternoon as the whole sky turned black, perhaps God's presence was next to Jesus in and through the criminal Dismas: the one speaking in Jesus' defense, the one dying next to him, the one who still spoke hope in Jesus, the one asking to be remembered.

⁶ From Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "The Man in the Middle."

The God of the universe speaks in many and unfathomable ways, especially when Her heart is breaking.

The God of the universe offers His presence in many and unfathomable ways, sometimes even through us.

The God of the universe draws near to us in many and unfathomable ways, even when we feel only God's absence.

One cross makes a crucifix. Three crosses makes a church.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of life and death go with you –
alerting us to the places God continues to speak in many and unfathomable ways –
even through the condemned,
even through us –*

That healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Go in peace.

Amen.

