

Immanuel Lutheran Church
Sermon for Good Friday, 21 March 2008

By Ashley Hall, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Theology, Fordham University
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1-19:42

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

Tonight, we confront the apparent utter failure of God to intervene for good in the world. All the preaching and all the miracles performed by Jesus seem to have been in vain. All the promises of Jesus and all of the hope ascribed to him are dashed on the harsh reality that he now hangs, bloody and dejected, upon a shameful cross. We heard the critics shout from the foot of the cross "If Jesus really was the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, it certain does not seem to have done him any good!" In addition to the ridicule, we witness to the suffering that is taking place at the foot of the cross. The tears and wailing of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Apostle John know no consolation. Not only have the other disciples abandoned Jesus, they have abandoned them as well, for these three must mourn and face ridicule alone. God seems to have abandoned them too, for they find no comfort from heaven, no sign that God will intervene. Of course, we know about the Easter miracle to come. However, for the disciples it was a day of bitter mourning with no miracle in sight.

What kind of clear cut-meaning and purpose can be found in that kind of suffering? The short answer is: none. The mystery of human suffering and death — not to mention the Incarnation — is far too profound to be captured in easy and trite answers. Nonetheless, we affirm in faith that God is at work, even in the most desperate and darkest hours.

To begin to address this question, I'd like to draw your attention to a wonderful chorale written by Johann Sebastian Bach for his *St. Matthew Passion*, first performed on Good Friday, 1727 at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany. Bach is well-known as a great musician but we should recall that he was also a musician of the Church; his job was to compose music for the Lutheran services held in Leipzig. His contributions to

the Church are so profound that one scholar has called Bach "the fifth evangelist." In a very brief chorale from the *St. Matthew Passion*, the narration of the passion of Jesus pauses. The congregation joins the choir in singing the following verses:

I am resolved to stand here beside you;
do not then try to send me away!
I will not depart from you
while your heart is breaking.
When your heart goes pale
in the final push of death,
it is then that my arms will embrace you
and hold you to my chest.

This chorale serves a three-fold purpose for us on Good Friday.

First, it is an exercise in Christian piety. We are invited to pause and sit in the discomfort of death and the ambiguity of our future. We pause to cast a sympathetic and tearful eye on the deep sorrow and pain experienced in that moment. We remember the horror that a very real human person, Jesus of Nazareth, has been unjustly accused, tortured, and now languishes in a painful death. In our resolve to stay at the foot of the cross, we join our lamentations to those of Mary and the faithful disciples. With them, we cry up to the dying Jesus, "I am resolved to stand here beside you . . . I will not depart from you." We are resolved to stay until the end. When Mary, the mother of Jesus, cradles the corpse of her bruised and bloody child after it is brought down from the cross, we too say "my arms will embrace you and hold you to my chest." In joining our sorrows with those at the foot of the cross, we are resolved to reaffirm our commitment to the Christian faith, to maintain Christian hope in the face of insurmountable odds, especially when God seems so silent.

Which brings me to the second function

of the chorale. It affirms that God in fact is not silent. In that moment, God is more intimately present to Jesus that we can immediately discern. When Jesus cries out “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me!” we can have no doubt that it is a sincere expression of anguish and longing. In his hour of suffering, Jesus turns to Scripture. Jesus is praying Psalm 22, which begins “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” While maintaining the desperation of the psalm’s beginning, we need to also see that it is a prayer of hope. The psalm concludes with the affirmation, “I will tell of your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you . . . For [God] has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and [God] has not hid his face from [the one who suffers], but has heard when he cried out to him!”

In the midst of great suffering, Jesus gives us one last testimony: God is not absent from those who suffer. While words of dedication and hope rise up from the foot of the cross, words of confirmation and consolation descend from heaven upon the cross. God’s everlasting love and mercy are poured out upon his only begotten Son. God has responded to the suffering Jesus:

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while your heart is breaking.
When your heart goes pale
in the final push of death,
it is then that my arms will embrace you
and hold you to my chest.

God does not forsake anyone who calls out to him.

This brings me to the third and final purpose of the chorale: to point to the mystery of the cross. We

call to mind the message of the cross to each of us. The Cross is the ultimate revelation of God; it forces us to radically alter our understanding of power, wisdom, and love. In the frailty of Jesus, God’s foolishness is revealed as wisdom. In the suffering of Jesus, God’s weakness is revealed as power. Finally, it was divine love that led Jesus Christ to endure a human death. The Cross is the everlasting proclamation that God is not some abstract being who dwells in the heights of the highest heaven, whom we implore to deign to intervene in our suffering. Rather, the Cross declares in no uncertain terms that God is intimately involved with Creation, that there is no circumstance that can ever separate us from the love of God. God’s love is eternal and God’s love is for every living creature. Whether we are good or bad, whether in joy or suffering, God is intimately present to us. It is in our most profound suffering and at the moment of death that the proclamation of the Cross radiates out to all the world, to each of us:

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Therefore, my brothers and sisters, let us take to heart tonight’s reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Gathering at the foot of the cross, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . . Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

Amen.