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Sermon by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender

## The Fourth Word

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Years ago, in some long-since forgotten place, I read about a little boy who was looking at a picture book, learning for the first time the story of Jesus. He came at last to the picture of the crucifixion itself. He looked long and thoughtfully at the scene depicted there--the crown of thorns, the spear, the nails, the torso stretched out on that cross. Finally, having taken it all in, he turned the page and said, “If God had been there, he would not have let them do it.”

And yet, the mystery of it all, the mystery is that God *was* there--and God let them do it.

What are we to make of that mystery? Of the seven last words of Christ, perhaps of all the words in the Bible, there can be very few that invite our speculation more than Jesus’ cry of abandonment: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” His cry invites us, and in some ways seduces us, to try to figure out how it could be that God could be abandoned by God.

In the mystery of the love that the Father has for his Son from eternity, which love the Son from eternity offers back to his Father through the bond of their Spirit, in the mystery of that never-ending and unconquerable *presence* to each other in love, the Father is *absent* from his beloved Son at the cross.

*We* puzzle over “how” that could be, but notice that Jesus does not. His question is not “how?” but “why?” That one Hebrew word--*lama*--is the saddest word of all in this story. “Why?”

If the question is “how” God can abandon God, then let us be honest: We cannot penetrate this mystery and give an answer. But if the question is “why,” we may at least know where to start. For the mystery begins not with God abandoning this man on the cross, but with man abandoning God. “O my people,” says the Lord, “why have you forsaken me?” All the generations of unfaithful humanity--both Israel and the nations--are gathered together in this one man, upon whom their unfaithfulness is laid.

Why did we do it? Why abandon God? Because we preferred to do things our own way. Because we were afraid to place our hope in God. Because we were weak when strength was needed, fearful when courage was needed, blind when sight was needed, confident of ourselves when humility was needed. “O my people, why have *you* forsaken *me*?” The cry of abandonment is, first of all, God’s own anguished cry, when we turn away from the One who has loved us from all eternity.

We have forsaken him, and it is therefore no surprise that he should seem absent just when we most need his presence. This has often been the sad experience of the generations of men and women in countless times and places: that God may seem to vanish from us in our time of greatest need. The confidence we thought we had in God is suddenly blown away, and we are left, it seems, entirely on our own to face our troubles. And, therefore, if in Jesus God has come to be one of us, to share our life fully and completely, why then, of course, he must also share this seeming absence of God in his time of need.

When we experience God's absence, that word "why"--*lama*--becomes our cry also. Why have I fallen ill? Why am I dying? Why is this one whom I love so dearly ill or dying? Why has my child not spoken to me for years? Why has my son been using drugs? Why is there no money to pay the bills? Why did my husband--or my wife--leave me? Why can't I find a way to set right that cruel word I spoke? Why can't I take back what I did so thoughtlessly in a foolish moment? Why isn't God here to make it all better?

All those "whys"--yours, mine, and those of generations long gone--are gathered and piled in a heap at this cross. All of it amounting to what the little boy instinctively thought: "If God had been there, he would not have let them do it." Why aren't you present here, God?

And, therefore, in order to be present, to be God with us--to be Immanuel--Jesus must experience the absence of God in his time of greatest need. Only in God's absence *from* Jesus can God be present *with* us *in* Jesus.

How God has done this we will never quite fathom. But that he has done it means that we can stop asking "why?" We can be confident that Jesus was the last human being who ever needs to feel completely abandoned by God. After this cross, we are never alone. We can look on pictures of the crucifixion not with horror or bewilderment, but with gratitude. God has been absent from Jesus so that in this same Jesus God may be present with us--present here, where we so often seem forsaken and abandoned.

On Good Friday, then, we can pray as the hymn gives us fitting word:

*Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,  
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee;  
Think on thy pity and thy love unswerving,  
Not my deserving.*