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980 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10028
3/25/2016, The Fourth Word of Jesus from the Cross
Mark 15:34

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

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)

We can weather a lot in this world if only we are not forsaken. It is sad to think about anyone on this face of this earth being forsaken. To be left behind is a dreadful thing, especially if it feels as if *everyone* has turned away. Pity the forsaken teenager, for example – a teenager in a rough neighborhood in which nobody seems to care. There are children for whom home is no refuge, school is no shelter, the very sidewalks carry danger. It is a terrible thing when all things seem to conspire together to say: you do not matter! It is a terrible thing, I say, when hope forsakes people – when neither the past, nor the present, nor the future seem to hold anyone who really cares all that much.

Likewise, it is a terrible thing when a society forsakes any portion of its members – when the elderly or the disabled or minorities are left lonely, without support, bereft of care. To be forsaken in this world is to be left in misery. Even Adam in the lovely garden could hardly stand to be deprived of community. The LORD could see it: It is not good that the man should be alone, that the woman should be alone, that anyone should have to face life or have to face dying alone. Abandoned, forsaken: to feel thus is to feel miserable.

You know this, of course, but it bears repeating: parents, do not forsake your children. Never give up on them. That is a good lesson we can learn from the recent Lenten parable of the Prodigal Son. The old man did not run after his son to tackle him and stop him from heading off to that far country. And yet the old man did run, did fly, toward his son when he saw the boy on the horizon coming home. In the story of the Prodigal Son, no matter how poor the boy becomes, there is one thing that must not be taken away from him: that is the knowledge that he has a home and that he has a good father, a good mother, back there at home. In that foreign land, the young man might lose everything — his wealth, his innocence, his virtue, even his food and shelter. But what he must not lose is the sense that he has someone back home who cares for him. The father of the Prodigal Son is a gracious father. He lets the boy roam, though he might well have foreseen the danger at hand. He refrains from cursing his son, he refrains from bitterness, he does not turn against his boy, but waits in hope. And one good day, his son comes home. The boy *can* come home because he is not forsaken. We can weather a lot in this world if we are not forsaken.

But on Golgotha's cruel cross, Jesus felt himself to be forsaken. He uses the words of Psalm 22 to express his sorrow. Many of us heard those words last evening during Maundy Thursday's stripping of the altar. Especially I was caught this year by this particular lament from Psalm 22:

⁶...as for me, I am a *worm* and no man,
scorned by all and despised by the people.

⁷All who see me laugh me to scorn;
they curl their lips and wag their heads...

It seems to me that to be a worm, is about as low in discouragement as one can go. I grew up on the old Choptank River down on Maryland's Eastern Shore. I remember digging up worms in the garden or on the river bank, fixing those worms on the hook, and catching fish with them. To be a worm, burrowing through the soil or pierced on a hook – bait to catch a fish, thought to be a more noble of God's creatures – well, that's a pretty humble existence, being a worm! Yet Jesus – the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the One through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made that was made – this Jesus on the cross is put in mind of Psalm 22:

⁶...I am a *worm* and no man,
scorned by all and despised by the people.

The passersby mock him:

³⁹And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads...⁴²He saved others; himself he cannot save. (Matthew 27:39-42, KJV)

In this way, they magnified the misery for our Lord. Not only did his disciples forsake him and flee, not only did the very sun itself seem to withhold its light from the whole affair, but the people and the rulers intensified his abandonment by mocking him. They threw contempt toward him, as if not content that he should be forsaken, but also that he should be despised.

Again, the word "forsaken" is such a sad word. Now ponder this: If *anyone else* were to cry out to our holy God, "Why have you forsaken me?" the universe and the angels could answer, "Because, in some measure, you DESERVE it." Compared to our holy God, each of us is a disappointment. Each of us is a heartbreak – sometimes to one another, but daily to God. It is not a matter of pretending when we bend the knee at the Confession and say:

We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and

deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

Such confessions are not idle piety, but the stone, cold truth. As the prophet Isaiah puts it:

All we like sheep have gone astray ; we have turned every one to his own way; (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

And so, if any of us were to cry as Jesus cried on the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” the universe could cry back at us, “Because you deserve it! Have you forgotten what you did? the harm you caused? The coldness you displayed?” And on and on.

But *Jesus* did not deserve to be forsaken. Of all the human beings who have lived and walked on this old globe, Jesus is the one among us who did not deserve to be forsaken. And come Easter Sunday morning, just a couple days from now, we will find that he was not in fact forsaken. Something else was afoot on Good Friday. That day did not bring the divine forsaking of Jesus, but the salvation of humanity. And so Isaiah of old is able to look ahead and complete his words about us going astray in this manner:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; *and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

And then we can take to heart the great words about “his stripes”:

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5, KJV)

That is what was going on on that first Good Friday. Jesus felt himself to be forsaken, and felt himself to be a worm fixed to the hook, that he might thereby defeat sin, death, and the devil for our sakes.

We can weather a lot in this world if only we are not forsaken. And you, my friends, are not forsaken. If you should be enduring some hard stretch in your life, or if such a hard season is ahead of you, please remember this: Jesus Christ was forsaken by everyone in sight, that you shall never be forsaken. If everyone else were to abandon you, if even mother and father were to turn away from you, there is one person in the universe who lives forevermore and who will *not* turn away from you. He is the One who is in charge, both now and through eternity, even Jesus Christ our Lord, whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.