

Sunday, April 10, 2022

The Nonnegotiable Element

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")

(Message Six)

(Mark 15:33-41)

Scripture:

³³ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

³⁶ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Message:

It was now high noon. The sun should be at its zenith. But on this day, a great, black, frowning range of cloud from the west has killed the sunlight, closed the sky, and swallowed the earth in a yellow darkness.

The wind is still. The city stops breathing. Something significant is amiss. The animals are restless; their owners call their names through the darkness. Parents stand in doorways crying out for their children: *Miryam! Yeshy? Yeshua!*

The silence is **deafening**. The darkness **blinding** – in the middle of the day.

“*In that day,*’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight...I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.’” **(Amos 8:9,10b)**

Yeshy! Yeshua, come home now! Now!

This darkness is the darkness of Egypt, thick darkness, a darkness which can be felt...even tasted. *Yeshua! Yeshua! Where are you?* The child cannot be heard.

No human mockery can match the voice of this storm for mortal scorn. Perhaps the wind screams; the raindrops hurl like pellets stinging the flesh; the lightening shatters the darkness—the sudden blinding light hurts the eyes.

Silhouettes stutter and black out: three crosses, guards, a few women at a distance. Those who laughed earlier in the morning are gone. No one is laughing now.

It was how it was - the first hour of the afternoon, and then second, and then the third.

We read and pray the Jesus story; we let our imaginations be shaped by his life; his words color our thinking; his behavior challenges ours.

As Mark’s Gospel, inspired by the preaching of Peter, now nears its completion, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples for the Passover Feast. Jesus has tried **three times** along the way (**8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34**) to prepare his disciples for what is coming; they have lent him only a deaf ear.

And then it happened—not only his death, but a slow, **excruciatingly** painful and **violent** death – a death by **crucifixion**.

HIS PRAYER (15:33-34)

The few who withstood the storm are still on the hill at the ninth hour of the day. The lightning had fled. The thunder has exhausted itself. But the blackness persists. Then, suddenly, a voice worse than thunder—a human voice—a horrified wailing, pierced the **silence**: *Eloi! Eloi! My God! My God!*

Who was that? It was the one in the center. The one in the perfect center of darkness, the focus of this storm; it was him: *Eloi! Eloi! Lama sabach-thani?*

Jesus of Nazareth, *Yeshua!* The King of the Jews, him. He hangs in an abyss, that one!

“My God, why have you forsaken me?” This is Jesus’ prayer. Who answers him?

The thunder is silent. The heavens are shut. The dark is rejection. The city holds its breath. This silence is worse than death. **No one** answers him. No, not even **God**.

Yeshua. Jesus, who has become so despised by many has now also become distasteful to God, his Father. It is against *him, the Son of God*, that heaven has been shut, and the light turned off.

In this terrible moment, the loss of light, the darkness for humanity, is the loss of love and life for its Messiah, its Christ, its Savior. Between the Father and the Son, there now exists an impassable gulf, a chasm.

Although the Son still **loves** the Father **obediently** and **completely**, the Father now despises the Son completely because the Father sees in His Son the sum of all human **disobedience** – including yours and mine - from the beginning until the end of time.

This is the mystery of all time, the mystery of our **eternity**: How can Christ be completely obedient in his love of the Father and the full measure of our disobedience, both at the same time?

In this terrible moment, this mystery is also a fact that seems to last forever. Hell's horror is that it lasts *forever*. This is the **bitterest** drop in the cup: Jesus is absolutely **separated** from God, His Father - from the God and Father he deeply and **intimately** loves. Jesus, as our confession (cf. Apostle's Creed) states, has "*descended into Hell.*"

The darkness that covers Jerusalem from noon until three (and separates everyone from everyone) is a poignant visual of the damnation of the Messiah, who wails and gnashes his teeth in an utter solitude from now (it would seem like) unto eternity.

"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2)

The nature of hell is that lasts forever; there is no hope. It is eternal. "*And he has descended into Hell.*"

HIS CRY (15:37-39a)

"And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last."

"The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

This "curtain" separated the **Holy Place** from the Holy of Holies is ripped in two—the place the high priest entered only once a year on Yom-Kippur to make atonement for his sins and the sins of the people of God.

A scarlet cloth was tied to the horns of the goat to be sacrificed (**Leviticus 16**). If the cloth later turned white, it meant God had forgiven Israel's sin

according to **Isaiah 1:18** – “*Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow.*”

But when the curtain was ripped from top to bottom, it meant the sacrifice of a goat or a lamb was no longer necessary. The price had been paid. The sacrificial death of *The Lamb* was sufficient.

God was offering **everyone** access to his presence, to the place where he dwelt, to his “throne room” (**Heb. 10:19-22**). Because of his shed blood, we can have communion with God! Prayer – you and I can now pray to the Father because of Jesus’ prayer.

It came at a price – his death. Death is the defining act of Jesus’ life. Jesus came to die! It was the reason he lived. Jesus himself said, “*It is for this reason that I have come to this hour*” (**John 12:27**).

His dying took about six hours, from nine (**Mark 15:25**) to three o’clock in the afternoon, on a Friday, just outside the walls of Jerusalem. As Jesus was dying, he continued to pray as he had always prayed. He prays seven one-sentence prayers.

None of the gospel writers give us all seven. Mark gives us this one: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (**15:34**).

The Church has long prayed these last words of our dying Savior (quoted from **Psalms 22:1**) to practice the presence of Jesus. Followers of Jesus long to identify with the pain and suffering of Jesus. We long for our death to be congruent with Jesus’ sacrificial life and death and give witness to his resurrection.

Jesus’ death is a real death. His death is an historical fact. Nothing in Jesus’ life is as meticulously **documented** as his dying and death.

The Apostle’s Creed simply says, “*Dead and buried*” but it is a death every bit as physical as each of ours will be. His heart stopped. His brain stopped. There was a precipitous drop in his body temperature. Jesus was dead. Dead!

But with Jesus, there was far more happening than just the cessation of vital signs. A divine event occurred in the death of Jesus. **Salvation** was **accomplished**. Jesus’ death, his voluntary, intentional, and sacrificial death, was an offering for the death-dealing sins of the world.

Jesus’ death was a death that conquered death. It was the death of death. This is perhaps the greatest mystery in heaven and on earth of all time.

Pause a minute and realize how **unfathomable** this is. Some of our best minds have tried. The best of the best’s best thinking and praying are not without some benefit:

- They provide us glimpses into the profound and eternal workings of the Trinity.
- They offer us glimpses into the mystery that radically and comprehensively transforms our lives.
- They provide us glimpses of the hope that we will be ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven.

But when all is said and done, when everything we know and understand about what God has done in Jesus is added up, we still have little clue of the inner workings of the cross and our salvation. If you think you understand God, you have **misunderstood** him. This mystery shapes the way every Christian lives and dies, believes and loves, forgives and is forgiven.

Actually, this is a mystery we can't examine from afar out of curiosity; this is a mystery we are required to inhabit in order to experience its blessing.

The death of Jesus can be most easily understood and accounted for on a physical and historical level. The salvation Jesus accomplished on the cross cannot be.

It is the issue of our salvation (our eternal life) - not a coroner's autopsy of his death - that keeps bringing us back to the cross over and over again. Revisiting Jesus' death is different than making a visit to a cemetery, bringing flowers, and keeping the memory of our loved ones in focus.

We do not approach the cross to merely remember or do homage. We come to find the meaning of our (daily) dying in the presence of Jesus' dying for us.

The Apostle Paul gives us the vocabulary to do this and he **describes** and invites us to see our *daily dying* (the suffering in our life) as participating in these eternal dimensions of Jesus' death.

- When Paul writes, "*I have been crucified with Christ*" (**Galatians 2:19**), he probes the salvation dimensions of Jesus' death as he experienced them.
- When Paul writes, "*I die every day!*" (**1 Corinthians 15:31**), he is giving witness to the sacrificial nature of his life he offers every day as he follows the way of Jesus to the cross.
- When Paul writes to his fellow believers, "*You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*" (**Colossians 3:3**), he is drawing us into participating in the salvation working of Jesus' death.
- When Paul writes from a prison cell on death row in Rome awaiting Roman execution, that Jesus, "*became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross,*" he urges his readers, to "*Let the same mind be in your that was in Christ Jesus*" (**Philippians 2:8; 2:5**).

As Christians, we die twice. Our first death is when we decide to **follow Jesus**, and deny ourselves, take up his cross, and chose to live trustingly and obediently and in his sacrificial community rather pridefully isolated in our own world following our own agenda. Our second death is our **physical death**.

We pray in one accord with Jesus as he prays this prayer about his impending (physical) death. It is through prayer we accept and embrace the death we die as we are baptized into Christ and become witnesses to a resurrection when we, having died, are raised with Christ (**Romans 6:5-11**).

Death is a non-negotiable element in being a **human** creature in a sinful world. Death is also the non-negotiable in being a **follower** of Jesus.

There have been times in the community of Christ when Christians have tried to experience (and appropriate) the suffering of Jesus by indulging in practices of mortification: extremes of fasting, deliberate sleep deprivation, self-flagellation, etc.

Praying with Jesus as he dies on the cross is not an invitation to morbidity; praying with Jesus as he dies on the cross is the door that brings us into the presence of God.

Our Prayer

We begin all our prayers from the empty tomb, from the place of resurrection. That is, our prayers only make sense in the light of Christ's resurrection. Neither Jesus' **death** nor ours can be understood or participated in apart from his **resurrection**.

While cross and resurrection are the South and North poles - Gospel polarities of a single, undivided salvation world - removing either pole guts salvation. Morbidity (a neurotic obsession with suffering) and masochism (self-imposed suffering) have no place in prayer or in our lives. Our basic approach to the cross and the resurrection, i.e., our fundamental prayer, is gratitude.

Jesus' "prayer" from the cross recalls the opening sentences of Psalm 22:1-2: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest."*

Death cuts us off from our moorings. It is the **final dismissal**. It is also the ultimate incomprehensibility. We no longer fit in. There is no longer a place for us. We are not given an explanation.

Meanwhile, the metaphorical **mini-deaths** we suffer as we follow Jesus to the cross anticipate and prepare us for what many Christians pray for: *a good death*.

These mini-deaths (some not so mini)—the dead ends, rejections, bewilderments, snubs, losses, abandonments, betrayals, unanswered questions, wrong turns—are each in turn a **shadow** of the final death. We die ten thousand mini-deaths before we are buried.

Along life's journey, it is surprising how many people experience the despair of being abandoned and cry out, "Why?"

We hear Jesus' cry of dereliction repeated repeatedly, echoing down the corridors of the history, ricocheting off the walls of homes, hospitals and churches.

But however long or attentively we listen, we, like Jesus, are often met with **silence**; we never hear an answer to the "Why?"

- Does it help to find ourselves praying in the company of Jesus, **with Jesus**, as he prays his "Why?" I think it does.
- Does it help to find Jesus praying **with us** as we pray our "Why?" I think it does.
- Does it help to realize that as Jesus prays his **experience** of God-**abandonment**, he is praying a prayer he recited as a child, the first lines of Psalm 22 - a psalm that expresses excruciating isolation, emotional devastation, physical pain? I think it does.
- Does it help to realize that the prayer prayed to its finish, ends up in "*the great congregation*" (22:25) of men and women among whom we (David, Jesus and many others) have been able to give witness that God "*did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him*" (22:24)? Does it help to know this prayer ends up quite **differently** than it begins? I think it does.
- Does it help to observe that this first prayer from the cross is not his last? Jesus **keeps praying** - broken shards of prayer from broken lives. I think it does.

Jesus is not done praying. And neither are we. And just so were clear, the nonnegotiable element we are talking about is **not** just **death** - the non-negotiable element here is **prayer**. Even, as Jesus walked through life and faced his death, he prayed. As we face life and death, prayer is essential, non-negotiable, if we claim to be followers of Jesus. No one gets to **follow Jesus** without it; and no one gets to be with him **forever** without first spending time on their **knees**.

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