

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”  
Matthew 26-27

“And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

The distance between Sunday’s frivolity and Friday’s finality is unfathomable. From a morning seemingly bright with children and hosannas to an afternoon darker than any of us want to imagine, from a savior humble and riding on a donkey to the Lord of life arrested, tried and crucified, we trace his final steps. For any who have followed him during these weeks of preparation, his questions have invited us, one way or another, to lose our lives that we might find them--find a whole new life with God--in him: “Who do you say that I am?” “Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt?” “What do you want me to do for you?” “Why do you call me good?” “Do you not yet understand?” But in his last three hours of life on earth, with seven words left to say according to the Gospels, Matthew records only one in the form of a question that is not addressed to us: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Before the why, there is the how. Jesus is first forsaken at every turn in the story, as Matthew tells it, a story that seems to be all about us. We are the actors in Jesus’ betrayal and arrest; in the disciples’ desertion and denial; in Caiaphas’ inquisition and Pilate’s release of Barabbas. Then there is the cohort of soldiers whose petty power mocks him; Simon of Cyrene compelled to give him who is helpless the only help mentioned on the way to Golgotha; the wagging heads of passers-by saying, “You who would destroy the temple in three days, save yourself”; even the bandits crucified with him receive mention. We betray him, desert him, deny him, mock him, hand him over and, along with every last character in the story, we forsake him.

But there is another character in the story who has everything to do with how he is forsaken. Hidden from the action, God is silent save for the words of a few seriously religious

men. Certain they know God's ways, their taunt beneath the cross makes explicit and unbearable what has been implicit and hidden until now. Almost as if to echo the tempter's words in the wilderness at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry they say, "Let him come down from the cross now and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to...."

"*If he wants to,*" God's defenders say, outing God as the only true actor in this story. Of course God can if God *wants to*, we think! But clearly God does not. Instead God hands him over to us. How has Jesus been forsaken? By God's inaction, we surmise, he is forsaken.

And with this surmise, the question turns from how to why. "Why?" we ask, joining Jesus' question from the perspective of those who must die and demand a miracle: Why does God forsake him to death? Why, if God is for us, does Jesus have to die? What has one to do with the other?

Begin at the beginning with the angel of the Lord telling of a son born to save God's people from their sins. Trace God's speech and God's silence, God's presence and God's hiddenness in verse after verse of Matthew and you hear the word of a Father spoken in a Son born to save us from life without God, to redeem us from the God-forsakenness we had freely chosen in a mythic garden. As he heals some, calls others, feeds the multitudes, speaks in parables, everyone but the religiously certain are taken with him. You think even you could almost follow him yourself, up to a certain point in the story, leave a few things behind, lose a little to gain a little.

But somewhere between Sunday and Thursday, the story takes this turn toward death; and it begins to dawn on you and on me that losing our life is more than a metaphor. Here only moments after the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday, we begin to reason with ourselves:

the cost is too great, the risks are too high, the demands of life with God are too much for us to bear. Therefore we will do what it takes to live without him. Self-reliance trumps self-sacrifice any day! So if we do not exactly deny him or betray him, we subtly desert him, leaving him alone in another garden to pray: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Silence. I imagine only a tear falling that is his Father’s love for the Son who is destined to be with us and for us in death as in life.

God cannot--I repeat--*cannot* deliver him from death because God is love. You would think the opposite would be true. But God’s love, unlike ours, does not end with death. Therefore from the beginning God destined his Son, his only Son, God’s beloved, to accompany us into the grave. “*If God be for us,*” Paul writes almost as if in response to our why, “who can be against us? He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up—handed him over to death—for us all...” Jesus alone is destined to love us with the love that does not end at death, even as he is destined to be raised by the love that will prove stronger than death. Why does he have to die for us? Because God has loved us in this way. Because short of death and resurrection, we would not know the love that is love and death would still have dominion.

From Gethsemane to Golgotha, therefore, the conversation ends between Father and Son, according to Matthew, until Jesus’ one final cry: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” Can you now hear, in Jesus’ next to last breath, God’s complete assumption of our human condition, God’s bearing in himself our choice to live without God in the world? According to New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Jesus does not “question the existence of God nor the power of God to do something...: [only] the silence of the one whom he now calls [not Abba, Father, but,] for the first time, ‘My God.’ ...Feeling forsaken as if he were not being heard, he no longer presumes to

speak intimately to the All-Powerful as ‘Father,’ but [speaks] the address common to all human beings, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Where is the God on whom the abandoned, the forsaken, the rejected and reviled call at the hour of their death? Here at the center of human history, God is hidden in flesh of our forsaken flesh. Precisely in our God-forsaking forsakenness, God is: “Not a remote and aloof spectator or non-participating director of this event” [Barth] but rather, as Elie Wiesel so powerfully proclaimed in a most terrible time of God’s seeming silence, “God is here and hanging on the gallows.”

*This* is God and God is like *this*. “God is not greater than [the Son] is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than [the Son] is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than [the Son] is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than [the Son] is in this humanity,” said Gregory of Nyssa. “It is of *this* God that the Crucified speaks...This means that we must be ready to be told by Him that we shall not find God where we think we should look for Him, namely, in a supposed height. It means that we must be ready to be told by Him that we shall find Him precisely where we do not think we should look for him, namely, in direct confrontation with and at the very heart of our own reality...where each of us is stripped and naked, where each is suffering and perishing, where each is engaged in futile complaint and accusation, where each is alone. The lonely man of Gethsemane and Golgotha, the lonely God, then comes together with lonely [men and women] in [their] deepest need,” Barth says. “Each of us can then say that in this place, even though [I am] forsaken and alone, [I am] not forsaken and alone, since [God in Christ] has stooped down and come to this place and been forsaken there. There among the smitten and abased, among whom we would prefer not to reckon ourselves, God has raised his throne....”

What else can we say except this place of death is where God wills to be with us. This Man of Sorrows is who God wills to be for us. Put another way, God is love and love's only way is the way through suffering and death. Dear sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, sinners of his own redeeming, I do not know all the hells you have endured or are enduring. I do not know the particular darkness in which you have dwelt or now dwell with no one to help. I do not know the rejection you have borne or bear this very day, nor the quiet desperation in which, forsaken, you have cried out. I know only him whose love, unlike our own, does not end in death. Thanks be to God.