

Forsaken



Over the past two weeks, our Youth Group has been watching the movie

All Saints. It's the true story of an Episcopal Church in Tennessee whose pastor, Michael Spurlock, has been sent to get the church ready to close/be sold to a big-box store that is going to bulldoze the building. It's heavily implied in the movie that the big-box is a kind of mart where one could buy walls. But something changes when a group of refugees from Burma move to the area and start attending the church since they are Anglicans. The pastor has a radical dream: use the land the church has to start a farm, grow crops, including sour leaf which was native to the Karen and could be sold to a local Chinese restaurant in order to pay the church's oppressive mortgage. And at first, everything is going great, the crops are growing, the church is about to be prospering, everyone is working together harmoniously. The Burmese refugees are becoming more and more a part of the church. The only thing that could go wrong was massive flooding that would destroy the harvest.

Which is exactly what happens. According to the movie, the plan is to start the harvest with a big church picnic, but an oncoming, fast-moving storm forces the church to change their plan: the harvest has to happen right that minute. The church and the community band together; they salvage as much as they can, but they still end up losing quite a bit of their harvest.

A while later, as Michael is sitting down, his son comes to him and says, "If it was God's idea for us to plant the crops, why would He let them be destroyed?" The church, the refugees, the community, the pastor, his family all feel the same way: forsaken. Abandoned. Alone.

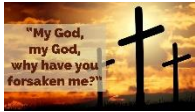


This is an unfortunately familiar feeling. I am sure that even as I was

telling the abbreviated version of this story from a movie about

Tennessee, a few of our minds were drawn a little closer to home. A little south of us. I am sure there are actual farmers who were depending on the grain that has been washed away and ranchers depending on the livestock drown in the flooding. It's easy for us to imagine a congregation in Tennessee and neighbors nearby.

It's a feeling that even Jesus felt on the cross, and to which Jesus gave expression on the cross. These are among the most moving, disturbing, and powerfully haunting statement of the seven: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

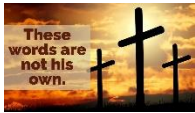


This is a painful statement, to be sure, but it is also a confusing

statement. Robert Mounce poses this question in his commentary on

Matthew 27 "What does it mean for God (the Father) to forsake God (the Son) when they are one in essence?" With our belief in the trinity, Jesus is God; God is God, and the Spirit is God; God in three persons, blessed trinity. So how is it that Jesus feels abandoned by himself, by his essence, by his defining characteristic? He's the son of God, begotten not made, And I have to be honest with you: I don't have a good answer for this. I do not completely understand this myself, but it seems clear to me that as he hung on the cross, Jesus no longer felt the presence of his Father. He felt alone and abandoned. And in that moment, his concern for other people, for the crowd, the thieves, for the new family made in his name, dissipates. As the sky darkened and fell, Jesus' situation changed. He felt the words of the crowd, he felt the nails, he felt the thorns. He felt it all.

That feeling of being abandoned, of being forsaken, pierces his heart and causes him to cry out. The verb Matthew uses in the gospel is a verb that meant shouting, and he added another word to emphasize his volume. He shouted. Now, remember a few weeks ago, I mentioned how much agony it took for Jesus to even speak. He had to press up on the nails in his arms to relieve the pressure on his diaphragm. Imagine how much more energy, how much more pain, it would have taken to shout. To cry out from the depth of his beaten and broken being. “Eli, Eli, Lena sabachthani?! My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”



And the words he shouted, this phrase, these haunting words, are not his own. They are that of a psalm, words to an old memory, a set of words he would have learned as a boy in Hebrew school, what we now call Psalm 22. He found the words to express the depth of his loneliness, bewilderment, and pain. The Hebrews standing around the cross would have known this psalm and immediately recognized what Jesus was saying. Adam Hamilton puts it this way: “It would be like someone crying out ‘Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound’ among a group of Christians; most would immediately think to themselves, ‘that saved a wretch like me.’”

I don’t know if Jesus had the rest of that psalm in mind. I only know that he was in the deepest, darkest valley of human existence, and chose to quote from a psalm that started in a similar place but ends in glory, ends in victory, ends in words of God’s might and saving work. Psalm 22:31 says, “People not yet born will be told, ‘The Lord has saved us!’” And because of Jesus’ work on the cross and the tomb, these words are the very truth. I only know that Jesus is plumbing the uttermost depths of the human

situation, so that there might be no place where we have to go where He has not been before.



Because, friends, the heartbreaking reality is that at some point or

another in our lives, we will pray this same prayer, maybe not using the same words, but expressing the same sentiment. When someone we dearly love dies before we're ready. When we find ourselves facing a battle we never wanted to face. When we've been humiliated and been made to feel small. When the flooding ruins a harvest and threatens our livestock. If we haven't already been there, we will get there someday. We'll be forced to go through something, and we will feel utterly forsaken by a God who supposedly loves us.

In those times, we can pray to Jesus Christ, because he knows what we are experiencing and feeling. We can pray to the One who sympathizes with us in that moment. We can cry to the one who plunged into the depths of human experience.

Jesus passed through the uttermost abyss, and then the light broke. If we too cling to God, even when there seems to be no God, desperately and invincibly clutching the remnants of our faith, then quite certainly the dawn will break, and we will live through. We can lean on his everlasting arms because there is no where in life we can go, no experience in life we can have, no depth to which we can plunge where Jesus hasn't already been. This is the Jesus we follow, we love, and believe in for our salvation. This is the Lord who has saved us.