

Good Friday Sermon, April 15, 2022

After that lovely, intimate time the disciples shared with Jesus last night, all chaos broke loose. They went off to the Garden of Gethesemane, where Jesus prayed, prayed hard, that he would be able to face what lay ahead - or even better, not to have to face it. He doesn't seem to have been quite finished that when the soldiers showed up, led by Judas, and suddenly, all hell breaks loose.

The disciples try to fight with swords, rather inexpertly, but Jesus soon puts a stop to that. It seems he has found the strength he needs, although he wasn't sure he had it. The disciples all run away, and Jesus is arrested. Peter and the beloved disciple follow them into the high priest's palace but soon the soldiers and servants figure out Peter is a Galilean and he ends up denying he even knows Jesus. And he is so upset to find that Jesus' prediction has come true that he goes out weeping and abandons Jesus, overcome by his own grief and remorse.

And after that it becomes the stuff of nightmare. The disciples confidently expected Jesus to become the Messiah, the King of Jerusalem and all Judea. Even though he told them it wouldn't be like that, they didn't understand. They confidently expected him to raise an army and get rid of the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of the Jews. And it's all going terribly wrong. Jesus has been arrested. He is doing nothing at all to save himself. And the next morning, the disciples can see, from wherever they were hiding, that Jesus has been condemned. The crowds that hailed him as King a few days ago are now calling for his crucifixion. He goes through the streets carrying his cross, staggering under the weight. They can see he has been beaten, and he is wearing a cruel parody of a kingly crown, twisted from thorns. And he is nailed to the cross and crucified.

This was not what the disciples expected. The only ones with courage enough to go and be with Jesus at this time are his mother, her sister, Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopas, and the beloved disciple. And Jesus dies. This was all wrong. Imagine not only their grief but their confusion. We know they totally misunderstood Jesus most of the time. Even though he warned them of this, they weren't prepared. The bottom dropped out of their whole world and they felt lost. And afraid. They end up hiding out together in that upper room, the scene of such intimate love the night before, now filled with frightened, disappointed, bewildered people. It must have felt like a nightmare to them, unreal.

Have you ever experienced that? When it seemed that the bottom had been knocked out of your world and you had no idea how you would go on? I felt that way when my brother died. I was going through the motions of living, but basically I was just waiting to wake up out of this terrible dream. It didn't seem real to me. I expect that's how the disciples felt. I wonder if it was like that for Jesus, too?

I don't know about you, but when I end up living through a time like that, I am sustained by my nearest and dearest family and friends. Even if they don't do anything - and usually there's nothing much they can do to make it better - just knowing they're with me is helpful. But almost all Jesus' friends abandoned him, except those few.

And Jesus even felt that God had abandoned him, as Mark and Matthew tell us. Have you ever felt that? Felt that God was no longer there? Not been able to feel God's presence with you? I have, and it's not a good feeling. It's kind of panicky. And Jesus felt even that. I've always thought that was the worst thing Jesus experienced, maybe the worst thing the Father and Spirit experienced too: that sense of being cut off from each other. Because, as Jesus told his disciples the night before, he and the Father are one. And the Spirit.

Do you think God really had abandoned him? I don't. Even though he couldn't feel God's presence, even though this was a terrible situation, I don't believe God had abandoned him. I don't believe God ever abandons any of us, whether we can feel that he is there or not. I believe God sticks it out with us and feels every pain with us, maybe even more strongly than we feel it ourselves. But sometimes the depth of our pain is such that we can't feel that presence, can't be aware of it. I believe that it is at those times that God actually holds us most closely.

Jesus told his disciples the night before he died that he and his Father were one. He told them that if they had seen him, they had seen the Father. And the next day they saw him crucified. They saw him forgiving his enemies even as they were killing him. They saw him taking care for those around him. They saw him refusing to fight and harm those who came against him. They saw him loving and trusting God, even when he felt abandoned by him. And when they saw him, they saw the Father also, Jesus said.

In tender compassion for his erring, rebellious, stubborn children, God's love led him to come among us, to be born among us as one of us. God's love led him to teach, to heal, to forgive, to empower. God's love led him even to the cross to die for us. God's love led him to put himself into our hands and show us his love, no matter what we did with him. In everything he did, Jesus was one with the Father, doing the Father's will, and when we see Jesus, we see the Father.

People often have the idea that "God" is a mighty, vengeful, smiting being, and Jesus came to rescue us from God's wrath. But this is not what Jesus told us. He told us that God loves us, agonizes over us, and was willing to die for us. Jesus the Son and the Father are one. The forgiveness that Jesus spoke from the cross is the forgiveness of the Father. The loving care that Jesus showed in his life and from the cross is the loving care of the Father.

We have nothing to fear from God. Jesus has shown us how much God loves us and how far he is willing to go to show that love and to bring us forgiveness. We may accuse ourselves in our own hearts. But God, who knows our hearts better than we do, forgives us whatever we have done. We may feel unworthy of God's love, but that's coming from us, not from God. God judges us worthy of dying for. This is the message of the cross. This is the heart of our faith.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him. Thanks be to God.