

ABANDONED?

Matthew 27:45-50

July 30, 2006– Pentecost 8 [B]

One Fall when I was a boy – my father moved our family from Mississippi to Illinois to take a better job. I can remember loading our belongings in a U-Haul trailer the night before, hitching it to our 1963 Pontiac, and then early the next morning beginning the journey northward. In those days, the trip involved about 15 hours of driving and my father's plan was to drive it all in ONE day [hence the early departure]. And with the early start, we made good progress – even though along the way the weather turned COOL and it began to rain.

We drove all morning and all afternoon. But as evening approached, my father made a SIMPLE but HUGE mistake. Somewhere in the middle of NOWHERE, he miscalculated the distance between exits on the interstate – and **we ran out of gas**. Keep in mind that this was back in the “Dark Ages” of humanity – those days before cell phones and text-messaging – which meant **we were in a “pickle”**. In the fading daylight, my father got out and tried to flag someone down for a ride – but despite his best efforts – NO ONE stopped.

So there we were – stuck on the side of the road on a cold, wet night. It was uncomfortable and we got hungry – but what made it even WORSE was the sense that WE WERE HELPLESS and NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE. We felt “abandoned” – and it was TERRIBLE.

I wonder this morning – **have you ever known anyone who felt TOTALLY HELPLESS – “ABANDONED”?** As we approach the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we're beginning to hear that many Gulf Coast residents are APPREHENSIVE – and NOT just because of the possibility of another massive storm. *Coast residents are increasingly apprehensive that, once the one-year anniversary of Katrina passes, most people will assume things are back to “normal” – and the coast will be FORGOTTEN [“abandoned”].*

But what about YOU? **Have YOU ever felt “abandoned”?** If you've ever:

- sat by the bedside of a loved one who was slowly consumed by Alzheimer's or cancer – then maybe YOU know what it means to feel “abandoned”
- if you've ever stood by the grave of a child with an aching heart and NO answers – then maybe YOU know what it means to feel “abandoned”
- if you've ever gone through the anguish of divorce – then maybe YOU know what it means to feel “abandoned”

- if you've ever been "cut loose" unexpectedly from a job you've held for a long time – then maybe YOU know what it means to feel "abandoned"

I'd be willing to bet **there are LOTS of people among us who feel "abandoned"**.

The Scripture reading for this morning – it's about being "abandoned" – and specifically, it raises the troubling question: *Does GOD ever ABANDON us?* In the text for today – **Jesus is on the cross**. It's a scene that in some ways is difficult to comprehend – because just a few days earlier, Jesus had received a "hero's welcome" when he entered Jerusalem. But NOW he's been charged with SEDITION – rebellion against Rome – he's been found GUILTY – and the sentence for such a crime is EXECUTION – death by CRUCIFIXION.

Unlike the legal system in this country, **justice in the ancient Roman Empire was ALWAYS administered SWIFTLY** – so as soon as he is sentenced, Jesus is taken to the outskirts of Jerusalem and nailed to a cross beside a busy road. **His ministry – and his life – BOTH full of such PROMISE – suddenly come to a screeching halt**. And as he dies in AGONY, Jesus cries out: *My God, my God – why have you FORSAKEN me?* Literally, the question Jesus asks is: *God – why have you left me in such distress? Why have you left me helpless? GOD – WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?*

Now – obviously, the question for us is: **WHAT did Jesus mean by these words?** THAT'S been the subject of great debate for the last 2,000 years. For 2,000 years people have STRUGGLED to understand exactly WHAT Jesus meant. And through the years – several different "interpretations" have been developed.

For instance, **there are some who say that Jesus' cry of despair was exactly THAT – a CRY OF DESPAIR**. According to this interpretation, when Jesus reached the "end of the line" **he LOST HIS FAITH IN GOD**; when Jesus cried out from the cross, he was POINTING A FINGER AND BLAMING GOD for abandoning him and for allowing his mission to FAIL. Personally – I don't BUY this interpretation – but there are those who DO.

**Then there's a LARGER group who say there's A THEOLOGICAL PURPOSE behind Jesus' words**. They quote the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 – *For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ*. According to THIS view, because Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world, the communion that exists between the HOLY TRINITY [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] was BROKEN; and God – who is HOLY – turned away from Jesus –

and THIS explains Jesus' sense of abandonment. And THIS has been the "majority view" for most Christians through the ages.

However, there are those who make the case that **Jesus' words from the cross are simply an acknowledgement of his humanity**; the truth is **THERE ARE TIMES WHEN ALL OF US FEEL ABANDONED**. Suffering has a way of making people question whether God is with us or not. And when we CRY OUT to God and there are NO ANSWERS – when we PLEAD to God and God doesn't seem to listen – it's EASY to feel that we've been FORSAKEN and FORGOTTEN.

**Sometimes even people of FAITH can feel this way.** Through the centuries, Christians have spoken of something called **the "dark night of the soul"** – an experience of DESOLATION and ISOLATION in which God seems to be absent. And because Jesus was FULLY HUMAN as well as being fully divine – he wasn't "shielded" from experiencing the same kinds of QUESTIONS and DOUBTS the REST of us feel. So – maybe on the cross, even Jesus felt "abandoned".

But I want to suggest to you this morning that **MAYBE there's ANOTHER reason for Jesus' cry from the cross** – and maybe that answer is right here in front of us. These desperate words of Jesus from the cross are **a DIRECT QUOTE from the first line of Psalm 22** [I wonder how many of you knew that before today?]. There are a few things we need to know about Psalm 22:

- it was written by a shepherd-boy named David who is "on the run". He had been chosen by God to become the King of Israel. The only problem is – there was ALREADY a king on Israel's throne – SAUL – and when Saul learns of David's selection, he tries to hunt him down and DESTROY him. David is forced to run for his life.
- Psalm 22 is a type of writing known as a LAMENT. A "lament" is a PLEA FOR GOD TO HELP – but MORE than that – it's a PROTEST to God. Ancient Jews thought nothing of calling God to task when life went "crazy". In fact, the psalms ENCOURAGE it: it's OK to challenge God within the context of a relationship with God because God can handle it; what we discover in the Old Testament is that the DEEPER the faith of a person, the STRONGER, the LOUDER their complaint to God!
- Psalm 22 begins with DESPAIR – but it ends with CONFIDENCE IN GOD and the RESOLUTE HOPE that in the end VINDICATION will occur

- it was common Jewish custom to quote a familiar line of Scripture to refer to a larger text

So IF Psalm 22 is a cry for help from God, a LAMENT written by David, IF it begins with DESPAIR but ends with HOPE IN GOD, and IF it was common practice for Jews to quote a line of Scripture – DOES THAT CHANGE HOW WE SHOULD INTERPRET JESUS' CRY FROM THE CROSS? I think it DOES.

I believe Jesus' cry from the cross WASNT a cry of FAILURE and DESPAIR – but is instead an AFFIRMATION OF FAITH in God's ultimate goodness. I believe that when his own human life was coming to an end and when he faith was tested, Jesus turned to his ancestor David and to the traditions of his faith to strengthen him in his hour of greatest need. By using the words of Psalm 22, I believe Jesus is saying – *THIS DOESN'T LOOK GOOD – but I am still confident that God will work it all out*

Brothers and Sisters – **there are times when all of us feel forsaken.** Sometimes God seems ABSENT and it's hard NOT to despair. Some years ago, Bette Midler recorded a song called "From a Distance" – do you remember it? One of the lines was "*God is watching us – from a distance*". There are times when WE feel God is watching "from a distance".

But the good news this morning is that God DOESN'T watch us "from a distance" – God is NEAR. And when those moments come when OUR faith is weak and WE feel abandoned – we must do what Jesus did – we must reach out to others to help us bear our burden. Just as God became human in Jesus, God also takes on a "human face" whenever one person cares for another. And likewise – when others feel "abandoned" – we can be the "human face" of God for them.

The good news this morning is that **GOD NEVER ABANDONS US.**

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray....

[Invitation to Time for Prayer]

